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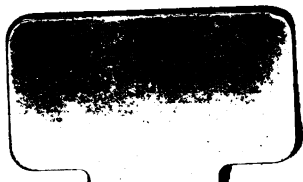
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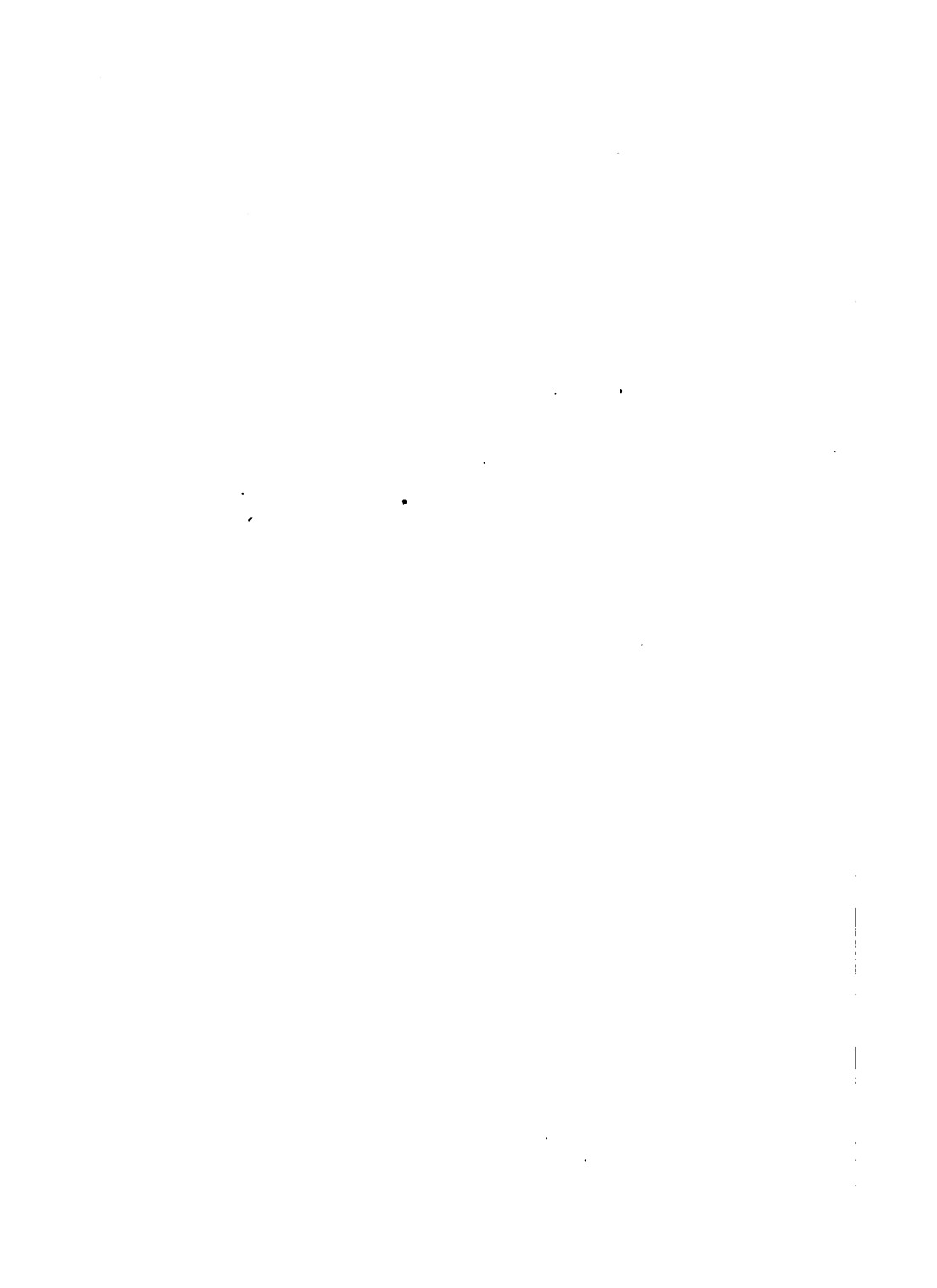




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**AGAINST HER WILL.**



Art thou poor, yet hast thou golden alumbers?

Oh sweet content!

Art thou rich, yet is thy mind perplexéd?

Oh punishment!

\* \* \* \* \*

Work apace, apace, apace, apace,

Honest labour bears a lovely face.

DEKKER.

Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well,  
When our deep plots do pall; and that should teach us  
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.

HAMLET.

# AGAINST HER WILL.

A Novel.

BY

ANNIE L. WALKER,

AUTHOR OF 'A CANADIAN HEROINE,' &c.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

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# AGAINST HER WILL.

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## CHAPTER I.

THE parish schools at Woodside were "breaking up" for Christmas, and the children were consuming tea and cake as only school-children can. The scene was a very long and comparatively narrow building, ordinarily divided by a movable partition into two school-rooms, but now thrown into one for the better celebration of the festivities.

On one side were two doors and six windows; on the other were eight windows. At each end was a stove, defended by an iron rail in guise of a fender. The doors and window-frames were black; the walls

were white, diversified by finger-marks. Every little square pane in the lattice windows had a little sprig of holly stuck in it, and on the end walls of the room were bushy garlands of evergreen, which had been made to bloom out into turnip-like blossoms of white, yellow, and red paper. Tin sconces on the walls held plenty of candles and more sprigs of holly, and all down the space stretched the two long tables at which the children feasted.

Boys and girls were, for the first time in the history of the school, having tea together; and Mr. Burton, the schoolmaster, and Mrs. Green, ~~the~~ mistress, regarded the innovation with distrust, and a general tendency to pounce upon any girl who might be suspected of being "forward" under the circumstances. "It was Miss Nora's doing, and, of course, there was no help for it," Mrs. Green said; "but to say that I approved of turning my girls loose among all those rough boys would be more than I was anyways prepared to do."

There did not seem, however, to be any

particular cause for Mrs. Green's doubts. Both boys and girls were deeply occupied with the business of the time, and if for a moment any of them had eyes and ears disengaged from the sight of plum cake and the clatter of milk-tins, was there not "the quality" to be looked at and listened to? There were present four ladies and two gentlemen, and five out of the six were occupied in filling plates and cups, and responding to the appeals of hungry eyes in all directions. The children, if they had been forced to speak the truth, would have owned that they liked to look at them better than at each other; for looking at "the quality" had a faint, but perceptible, flavour of the pleasure of being at a wild-beast show.

Across the upper end of two long tables a short one was placed, at each extremity of which a pretty young lady filled from a great urn the interminable succession of tin mugs brought to her by the other volunteer waiters. These two girls were Nora Darcy, the Vicar's daughter, and Mariana, the

eldest child of "Lawyer Bennett," one of the chief parishioners.

Nora was the prettier of the two, but she was also the best known, and by far the most at home in her present occupation. She worked away quickly and methodically; she saw an empty cup or plate at a surprising distance; she stood and moved with the air of a person who was thoroughly mistress of the situation; she called every boy and girl by their names, stopped an incipient practical joke with good-humoured but absolute authority, and managed to talk to her neighbours meantime with the courtesy of an amiable hostess.

Miss Bennett, on the other hand, did her work conscientiously, but she moved less and talked less. She only knew some of the children individually, and was a little shy of those she did not know. Though she worked hard, she did not fill nearly so many cups as her *vis-à-vis*, and her colour was not steady, like Nora's, but flickered now and then, especially when she was spoken to by one member of the party.

This was what observing youngsters might have noticed in their own circle. If they took the trouble to look as far as the space at the upper end of the room, they would be able to contrast dignified age with the blooming youth of the two nymphs of the urns. In the schoolmistress's chair sat Mrs. Darcy, wrapped in a soft grey shawl, and belying by her premature look of age and her snow-white hair the fifty years which were all she could really claim.

Everybody in Woodside knew that the Vicar's wife was "not strong." Many of them could remember how it had formerly been she who managed all such functions as the present, and how a great sorrow had struck her down too effectually for any thorough recovery. Still, she was well acquainted with all the personages and all the doings of the parish, and served as the oracle to settle doubtful questions of all kinds.

She sat still now, and did nothing; but her soft bright eyes saw all that went on.



A small boy, surreptitiously stuffing his mouth full of cake that he might be ready for another piece quite out of his turn, caught those bright eyes fixed upon him reprovingly, and choked with remorse and shame.

Mrs. Bennett sometimes paused near the Vicar's wife, but most of the time kept making leisurely journeys round the tables armed with plates of cake. She occupied herself in serving the children, but she never hurried; indeed, her round and matronly figure was not adapted for quick motion.

Those at the lower end of the tables might have fared ill if it had not been for the gentleman who had the gift of making Miss Mariana Bennett grow so prettily rosy. He worked vigorously, cutting slices of cake that might have fed Gog and Magog, piling them on the plates, and carrying them off to disappear in the further parts of the room with the most marvellous quickness. Mr. Forsyth was not so familiar an object to the eyes of the Woodside children

as the rest of "the quality," so they looked at him with more interest.

"His Reverence" Mr. Darcy was not, indeed, very familiar to any of them. They saw him in church, but still he might be classed among the lions—strange creatures not native to these regions, nor, like Miss Nora, of known ways and dispositions. He stood generally near his wife, but with an anxious and watchful air, as if waiting for an opportunity to make himself of use, and never able to see one. When he did succeed in supplying some child with a slice of cake or a fresh tin of tea, he did it with such real enjoyment, and with so charming a smile, that it seemed odd to see him immediately return to the side of Mrs. Darcy's chair, and stand there slowly rubbing his thin white hands together, instead of bestirring himself to serve his guests.

There is a point beyond which even boys and girls, with the best intentions, cannot go on eating cake; it takes a long time and a great deal of perseverance to arrive at it,

but it certainly exists, and was finally and happily reached at Woodside before the supplies laid in under Miss Nora's management came to an end. At length tea was over; the master and mistress placed themselves at the lower ends of the two tables, and the children, rising, proceeded to sing grace. It was an unsteady and slightly husky performance, but, considering the late achievements of the musicians, it was much to their credit that they managed to sing at all, and everybody seemed to think so. A great pushing away of forms instantly followed, and, going to work with good will, the whole party flung themselves upon tables, urns, plates, and cans, and began to sweep the remains of the feast out of sight into the adjoining "Mistress's House."

Over the commotion, however, Nora Darcy reigned as she had done over the tea. Her quick eyes saw, and her fresh young voice, kindly imperious, checked every misdirected effort; her active hands did a large share of the work. The elder people kept together in a quiet corner. Alick

Forsyth and Mariana Bennett helped fitfully; but Nora and her army, officered by Mrs. Burton and Mrs. Green, cleared and carried off the tables, put the benches close along the walls, and in five minutes had made all the space of the long room available for the games which were now to begin.

Then, above the clamour, not loud but all-pervading, which had arisen during the clearing of the room, rose the authoritative voice of the schoolmaster,—

“Silence!” Every child stood still instantly. “Miss Darcy is going to speak to you. Attend!”

Miss Darcy stood a step or two in front of the chairs occupied by the other gentlefolks, and made her speech. Her voice did not seem to be raised above its ordinary pitch, yet it sounded distinct and clear all over the long room. In fact, she was no novice in such public speaking, and knew by practice how to modulate her tones for the occasion. ‘This was all she had to say,—

“Boys and girls, you know that we have

generally had our Christmas tea and games in two separate rooms. I thought you would have more space and more fun if we removed the partition, and let you all be together. My father has kindly allowed me to have my own way in the matter, and I trust to you to show us that I have not made a mistake. Girls, I want you to remember that you *are* girls, and not boys; and boys, I want you to try to enjoy yourselves without being too rough or too noisy."

At the moment when Nora began to speak, the door at the upper end of the room opened, and four people came in quietly. They stood together in a group just inside the door, waiting till she had done, and then moved forward. A friendly greeting between them and the occupants of the chairs was going on, while Nora, now followed by Mariana, plunged in among the crowd of children and began to arrange games; but she had been into every corner, and had seen the "Mulberry Bush," "I wrote a Letter to my Love," and "Hunt the Slipper" all going on vigorously,

before she had thought or leisure to speak to them.

An old and a young man and two middle-aged women made up this new addition to the quality. The old man was Mr. Norton, of Dean's Hall, a bachelor, and the richest parishioner of Woodside. The two ladies were his sisters, twins, and so like each other, that it was no small comfort to their acquaintance that Mrs. Lansdowne was a widow, and dressed as one, while her sister, Miss Norton, liked bright colours. The young man was Mrs. Lansdowne's son Bertie, a soldier, and only a visitor at Dean's Hall.

Nora went round the Mulberry Bush two or three times, and then came back to the top of the room. The elder people looked at her complacently. They were fond of her, and had a sense of proprietorship in her which made it very agreeable to see her bright, pretty, and clever. Captain Bertie regarded her with a critical air, which melted gradually into a mixture of admiration and self-applause. After salutations

had been exchanged, he posted himself by her side.

"What an orator you are, Nora!" he said. "I did not know you went in for being strong-minded."

"I don't; I don't 'go in' for anything: I have not time."

She was keeping a keen look-out over the sea of heads before her, even while she spoke.

"It was a capital speech," he went on; "short and to the purpose. I shall come to you for lessons in elocution."

"Are you going to join in the games to-night?" she asked, paying no attention to his compliments. "They like it, as I dare say you remember; and Mariana and Mr. Forsyth will."

"I remember. But what a long time it is since I was at one of these teas! Who is Mr. Forsyth?"

"Oh, don't you know? He is some sort of a cousin of Mariana's, and they are engaged; it's the last news in Woodside."

"That's it, is it? I thought there seemed to be something of the kind going on. Yes,

I'll play, if you like ; but they all seem to be occupied."

"They will be tired of these games presently, and then we shall have Blind Man's Buff. They like that best of all."

"All right, then. But are not you afraid of getting your dress torn ? There are some pretty rough youngsters here."

"I never do get my dress torn. But, if I did, it could not be helped. People must do their work."

Symptoms of languor began to show themselves in the circle of children who occupied the middle of the room. Nora was instantly among them. The scene changed ; and, in ten minutes more, a big boy was standing in the centre of the room blindfolded, all the rest in watchful groups about him—the bolder near, the more timid in distant corners. The four young people, the schoolmaster, and schoolmistress were among the players ; the elder ones were screened by a barricade of benches, over which they good-humouredly regarded the gambols before them. And now the fun was at its height.



Bertie Lansdowne was caught, and made a tolerable blindman, making sudden swoops upon the small children, and then being obliged to release them because he did not know their names. At last he caught Nora, and, being by that time out of breath with his exertions, retired behind the barricade to watch her proceedings.

"How well Nora is looking!" his aunt whispered to him, as he stood beside her. He nodded; and, twisting his moustache between his thumb and finger, continued to follow Nora's light figure about the room with considerable admiration. *She* did not swoop, nor grope awkwardly, nor seem at a loss in any way. Swift and alert, she almost seemed to choose her prey, and, in a minute or two, captured a very small boy, whose head, covered with flaxen curls, she had no sooner touched than she named him "Johnny Dawes," and instantly transferred the bandage from her own eyes to his wide-open blue ones.

As she moved back to leave Johnny free to commence his chase, she glanced towards

her father, and, catching his look, doubtful and anxious as it always was when he felt that something ought to be done which he did not know how to do, she came up to him. "Do you want me, papa?" she asked. "Is there too much noise for you?"

Mr. Darcy held up his watch. "It is half-past seven, my dear, and I think we agreed that eight—"

"Yes, papa. Shall they leave off playing in ten minutes? I think that would be time enough."

"If you can manage it, my dear."

"Oh, yes; we will soon get them quiet when you wish it. Mother," she went on, bending down over Mrs. Darcy's chair, "don't you think our new plan has answered?"

"Yes, dear, perfectly."

"And you are not too tired with the noise and heat?"

"No. I only wished I could have helped you."

"Not a bit of need: we are so many to-night."

Nora continued to stand beside her mother until the ten minutes were over. Then she moved quickly and skilfully through the crowd, and spoke first to the master and then to the mistress. Two of the biggest boys she captured, telling them she wanted them to help her. Again the master's imperative "Silence!" rang through the room; and the order was given, "Range yourselves on the benches round the room."

Meantime Nora's two aides had destroyed the barricade; and, placing the benches which formed it side by side, had made of them a table, into the middle of which they lifted a large deal box, that had hitherto stood in one corner out of the way. Nora raised the lid. Mr. Darcy took his place behind the box. The two boys retired to their places, and a breathless silence spread itself through the room. Now, indeed, began the strongest, if the quietest, excitement of the evening. For the deal box was filled with prizes, each labelled, in Nora's writing, with the name and merits of the winner. Mr. Darcy took each prize from

his daughter's hand, read the label, and presented it to the boy or girl, who, blushing and bobbing, came up to receive it.

When the box was empty, the Vicar stood for a moment silent and nervous. He was going to speak, and did not feel that he had made up his mind to it. He felt sure the children would not understand him. Nothing but a strong sense of duty kept him from saying, "Nora, my dear, I wish you would do it." After a perceptible pause, he began,—

"It has always been my custom to say a few words to you on occasions such as the present. I have had much pleasure in giving you your prizes, and in hearing from Mr. Burton and Mrs. Green that they consider the past year's work satisfactory. I hope those who have got prizes this Christmas will get them next, and that those who have not will try to do better. We will sing a carol, and then you can go home."

He stopped, in the same undecided manner in which he had begun, and sat down, looking and feeling much dissatisfied.

with himself. But he had no time for regrets or amendments. The children stood up, and, with all the powers of healthy lungs (no longer interfered with by cake), commenced "Hark! the herald angels sing." Everybody joined except the Vicar, who could not distinguish one note from another; and Bertie Lansdowne, who was something of a musical connoisseur, declared afterwards that he found out on that occasion how the soul may be stirred by music which is far from satisfying the ear. The Evening Hymn followed, and so little time was lost in all this closing ceremonial that the church clock tolled eight just as (having seen every child start homeward) "the quality" came out of the close atmosphere of the school-room into the moon-lit stillness of the winter evening.

They came out into a stony little market-place, where a few oil lamps, feebly flickering here and there, were unable to maintain their dignity in presence of the cold, clear light and black shadows which the moon threw over their domain. There was frost in the air, and the voices of some of the

children were still audible, as, hurrying away in company to their neighbouring hamlet, they had taken up again the carol they had sung—

“Hark ! the herald angels sing,  
Glory to the new-born King.”

Most of the houses were closely shuttered; but, here and there, a gleam from a shop-window or an open door fell upon the rough pavement. At the further end of the market-place, where the inn stood, a man was holding a horse and whistling to while away the time. Hearing the children's voices in the distance, his whistling fell into the same tune, and accompanied them softly. Opposite to the schools was the churchyard-gate, and, beyond it, the green hillocks and white tombstones gleamed in the silver light, or lay deeply dark under the shadow of the church. Above, towards the clear blue depths, rose the slender and lofty spire, seeming to touch the floor of heaven with its top, and from the belfry the last deep notes of the curfew were still vibrating in the air.

The little procession came down the school-steps, and moved across to the church-yard-gate in silence. They were all well acquainted with the scene, but the surpassing beauty of the night gave it a new and solemn charm, and every one felt reluctant to speak. Mr. Norton had offered his arm to Mrs. Darcy, and they went first. Mr. Darcy followed with the other elders. Then came Mariana and her betrothed; last of all, Nora, dutifully attended by Bertie.

And now at last the Vicar's daughter had time to look at her old playfellow, and to give him five minutes of her undivided attention. He was a tall and rather handsome young fellow, not likely to fail in winning a girl's good will, even if the girl had not, like Nora, known him and been fond of him all her life.

"How delightful it is to have you at home!" she said to him, affectionately, after they had passed through the church-yard gate.

"At last!" he answered, laughing. "I thought you did not mean to say a word of

welcome, after I had taken so much trouble to get here to-night."

"Why, you knew how nice we should all think it. It seemed like old times; at least, it would have done, if you could have made yourself a foot shorter, and a little less like—"

"What?"

"Well, you know you are dreadfully 'grown up.' It reminds me unpleasantly that I am getting old myself, when I see you so completely of the big world, instead of our little one. And yet," she went on, after a glance at him, "I don't believe the change is more than skin-deep."

"I suppose one does change a little," he said; "but you are over critical to-night. At any rate, I am not changed in thinking Woodside the best place, and Woodside people the dearest people in the world. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes."

"And you, Nora, you are changed, too; for you are prettier than ever, and a perfect little autocrat."



There was no time for her to answer, for now, facing the west door of the church, they reached the Vicarage gate. Down a step from the churchyard into the garden, along a paved path always green and damp, and down another step at the entrance they went, following Nora, who had slipped to the front.

The door, hospitably "on the latch," admitted them into a small square hall, dimly lighted ; but they were scarcely within it, when their guide threw open another door at the back, and made way for the guests to pass into a flood of warm and glowing firelight.

The red radiance which flowed out into the hall to meet them, and which lit up every corner of the Vicarage drawing-room, was the only light there. The room was large, and in exquisite order ; the carpet very shabby ; the furniture old, and well used ; the chintz, which covered the sofas and curtained the large bow window, was as cheap as it was fresh and cheerful. Two candles stood on the table ready for light-

ing, and two more on the mantelpiece. Nora had lighted them before the whole party had got into the room; but still the glorious fire held its own, and flashed upon walls and ceiling with a splendid disdain of rivals.

Everybody gathered round it. Nora took their wraps from the visitors and disappeared with them, coming back in a moment with a small kettle in one hand and a large plate of muffins in the other. Both the young men jumped up to her help, but she passed them, saying,—

“Only let me put them down by the fire, and then you shall manage them for me, if you will.”

Kettle and muffins placed at the proper respective temperature, she dismissed Alick Forsyth, and allowed Bertie to help her to draw forward a table on which tea-things were arranged in readiness. Then she made the tea and poured it out, and every one found that they were perfectly ready to enjoy it.

Nora sat at her table, the labours of tea-

making nearly over, and looked with great satisfaction at the circle round the fire.

"Papa is in good spirits," she thought, "and mother does not look tired, or only a very little bit; and, by boiling the kettle in this room, I did really manage to have thoroughly good tea. I saw Mrs. Bennett enjoyed it, and she is particular enough. Mariana and her Alick look the picture of content, and so does Mrs. Lansdowne. I am so glad Bertie came. Christmas will be ever so much nicer."

She gave Bertie a friendly glance as she came to this conclusion, to which he replied by drawing his chair a little nearer to her, and asking for another cup of tea. It was not a romantic mode of expressing admiration, but it was perfectly genuine, Captain Lansdowne not being much addicted to tea in general. He asked for it simply because he was moved to speak to Nora, and did not think of anything else to say. So she poured it out for him, and he drank it, reflecting meanwhile that, though he had always known Nora was a very good girl

and a very jolly girl, he had never thought her quite so nice as this evening; and if it would please the old people, and Nora had no objection, perhaps the sooner she was Mrs. Herbert Lansdowne the better.

He was still in the same mood when, at ten o'clock, his mother declared it time to go home, and all the visitors left the Vicarage together. Nora and her father went with them to the door; and, as she came back, she said to her mother,—

“Is not it nice to have Bertie back? But I wish Jones had sent over the flannel.”

## CHAPTER II.

WHEN Nora's words reverted from Captain Lansdowne to the Christmas dole of flannel for the Woodside old women, her speech represented very accurately the state of her mind. She was unfeignedly glad of the young man's coming; but she would have been, just at the moment, still more glad to be relieved of a care, by knowing that the dilatory Jones had executed his commission, and that the old women ran no risk of being disappointed of their petticoats.

Bertie Lansdowne, once the inseparable companion of her brothers, all her life her own good-natured friend and playfellow, was a person of considerable importance in her world. What always has been, we are apt

to think, always will be ; or, rather, we think nothing about it, any more than we do of the succession of day and night. Nora would have been very much surprised if Bertie had shown any indifference to her society while he was at Woodside ; as for what he might do or feel when he was away, she had no time to trouble herself about the matter.

“People must do their work,” she had said to him ; and this was, in fact, the keynote of her life. But neither Nora herself, nor any of those about her (except perhaps her mother), ever remarked that a girl of twenty is not often called upon to do such work as fell to the willing hands of Mr. Darcy’s daughter. The Vicar was delicate, sensitive, and helpless, very poor, and, though learned, not very wise. His mind, which for thirty years had rarely travelled beyond the walls of his study, had gradually hardened into a fossil. His body seemed to sympathize with it, and was in a fair way to become a fossil also—was, at any rate, wholly incapable of active exertion. He conducted the services of the church, and

gave to his rural flock elegant and learned sermons, some of which (if his hearers had but known it) would not have disgraced Jeremy Taylor; he visited the sick *in extremis*, and baptized, married, and buried his flock whenever it was necessary. But he did nothing more. Having discharged carefully and reverently these indispensable duties, he retired to the company of his beloved books, and Nora became, *de facto*, Vicar of Woodside.

Mrs. Darcy had formerly been her husband's curate. Without ever having possessed Nora's bodily strength and vigour, she had had an energetic will and an unfailing goodness, which made her very useful and very dear to the parish. But a terrible calamity falling upon her had robbed her of health and almost of life. Two boys, older than Nora, had been the delight of her eyes: in one summer both were snatched from her. She watched the elder, night and day, for weeks, until he died in her arms; scarcely a fortnight afterwards, the younger, climbing a tree in the garden

in her sight, trusted to a decayed branch, fell, and, striking his head upon a stone, lay dead at her feet.

The mother lived through her sorrow, but lived a mere wreck of her former self. At sixteen, Nora began to consider herself the one member of the family who, being healthy in body and mind, was required to do what the others were incapable of. Mrs. Darcy could no longer go about the parish; but she knew everybody in it,—she could guide and advise. The two managed everything; but, as time went on, Nora added head-work to hand-work, and Mrs. Darcy had less and less of the burden to bear. Thus, at twenty, Nora administered the parish, and administered also the household at the Vicarage.

Hard task for a girl! Hard indeed, keeping every faculty of mind and body in full activity; but neither depressing nor distasteful. Body and mind thrived under this *régime* of practical, profitable work; there was not a girl in the parish or in the county who enjoyed life more than Nora.



She was up by candlelight on the morning after the school-feast; for it was Christmas-eve, and there was a busy day before her. When she lifted her blind and looked out, the first grey light of dawn showed a snowy landscape. The mouldings and buttresses of the church-tower were marked out by lines of white; a shining veil of snow-crystals lay over the roofs and the churchyard grass; on the black window-frame, close to her hand, a little ridge of crisp white flakes had gathered. "Snow always seems seasonable at Christmas," she said to herself, "provided there is not too much of it; and this has been only a shower. I hope it will keep fine to-day." A glance at the sky was reassuring. With a smile on her face, she took up her candle, and went softly downstairs. A roaring and crackling sound, and flashes of light shining out into the dark passages, showed her that the kitchen fire was already alight. "I can get a warm there presently," she thought, and opened a door near the foot of the staircase.

"Why, Joe," she cried, standing in the doorway, "you *are* early to-day!"

It was a small and rather shabby room, with tables and shelves loaded with all sorts of heterogeneous bundles, but all lit up by a flashing, crackling wood fire. This was just being coaxed into absolute perfection by somebody who knelt on the hearth-rug in front of it, and who scrambled to his feet at the sound of Nora's voice.

A rough head of reddish-yellow hair, a lantern-jawed face of the same tint, a smock-frock, and a pair of stick-like legs, covered with grey stockings and ending in enormous boots—this was what "Joe" presented to the eye. From some unknown depths within this object, a sort of amiable growl came to the ear.

"Iss, miss. I've a bin makin' a fire a bit early to-day. It wor a freezin' last night, miss."

"It's cold enough this morning, anyhow," Nora said, coming to the fire, and holding her benumbed fingers to the blaze. "Thank you, Joe."

Joe ducked his yellow head with a chuckle.

"You bin very welcome, miss. What bin I to do next?"

"Go and see if you can help Betty, please. I should like you to get as much of your work as possible done before breakfast, that you may take out some of these parcels for me afterwards."

"Iss, miss. Bin I to go to Betty now?"

"Yes."

He turned to the door, and Nora to the table. At the door he looked back critically at the fire. "Darn the thing!" he growled to himself, "it innot right nohow"; and he came back to give it another touch.

"Joe!" said Nora, severely.

"Iss, miss."

"Have not I told you not to say that word?"

"Nor I *did na* go to say it, Miss Nora, I do assure ye. I did mean as I would na never let you hear it again."

"Oh, Joe, Joe! I told you it was wrong

to say it—not that it was wrong to let me hear it.”

Joe got up from his knees again.

“He’ll go now, miss, I reckon. No, nor I did na go for to let you hear me a-saying of it nohow,” he went on in guttural tones, as he retreated; and the door shut behind him without any further admonition from Nora.

She looked at her little old-fashioned watch. “Half-past seven,” she said to herself; and, sitting down at the table, opened an account-book and plunged into her work. She was very busy still when the clock struck eight, but she instantly closed her book, wiped her pen tidily, and, leaving all in order, went out of the room. She passed through the kitchen with a cheerful “Is breakfast ready, Betty?” and, going into the dining-room, found breakfast laid indeed, but very far from being ready, except according to the free interpretation of the word which prevailed in this household. Going to work briskly and methodically, she cut delicate slices of bread, and toasted

them, made the tea, and was watching the first bubblings of the water in a little egg-saucepan, when Mrs. Darcy came into the room. The Vicar soon followed; they sat down, and during breakfast whatever was not yet settled of the day's plans was discussed and resolved upon.

Breakfast over, Nora's housekeeping must be attended to. Betty was, indeed, a maid-of-all-work *comme il y en a peu*; but neither Betty's hands nor Betty's skill could suffice for everything. Nora must arrange carefully the meals of the day, putting her more delicate fingers, as well as her sharper perceptions, at the service of those whose sickly appetites she had to provide for. Nora must herself dust and put in order the comfortable drawing-room—that room to which she and her mother both clung as the one place in the gloomy old Vicarage which was always bright and pleasant. Finally, she must give a careful inspection to her mother's and her own wardrobe, to see that all was ready for this evening's dinner at Dean's Hall.

So much could not be done without a considerable expenditure of time; and then there were interruptions without end. Joe had to be despatched in various directions. Many women, old and young, coming to the Vicarage for the regular Christmas gifts, would have gone away wounded in their self-esteem if they had not been allowed to have their "bit of talk" with Miss Nora. Miss Nora must see and admire the new garments provided by the Clothing Club; Miss Nora must spare just five minutes to hear her own particular Sunday-school children sing their own particular Christmas carol; and, let what would be done or undone, Nora must spend an hour, at least, in her father's study.

So the day flew by. There seemed to be hardly time to think what busy hours they were as they swept on, and brought the winter twilight; and the time of rest and enjoyment came, welcome, but not one moment too long deferred. Through the still, cold air a little procession started from the Vicarage gate, moving out of the deep

shadows into the glimmering whiteness of the star-lit, snow-sprinkled churchyard, and walking briskly, with a cheerful murmur of talk, across to the road towards Dean's Hall. The party of four were not all walking, it is true. Mrs. Darcy was seated in a queer conveyance—a sort of poor relation to the family of Bath chairs; and, after being almost smothered in wraps, was being pushed along by Joe. The Vicar walked on one side of the chair, Nora on the other; and, while the Vicar's slow and dreamy steps could hardly be quickened to suit Joe's lumbering but cheerful gait, Nora had some difficulty in restraining hers to the necessary slowness. After a day of work which would have half killed a delicate woman, she was so untired, so light of heart and spirit, that, but for the unseemliness of it, she could have danced along the broad, smooth paths to the music of her own singing. She restrained herself with some difficulty, but nevertheless was so apt to be a step ahead, that Joe at last breathlessly remonstrated.

"Ye do be goin' so fast, miss, I'm welly beat."

"Don't wait for us, dear," Mrs. Darcy said; "the road is quite clear and quiet. Run on."

"No, no, mother, I am not going to leave you. Don't hurry, Joe: I'm sorry I forgot I was walking so fast."

They had turned out of the churchyard now, at a corner opposite to the market-place, and were in a sandy lane, at the bottom of which many lights, shining from mullioned windows, showed a large house, lit up from end to end in hospitable fashion. The lane went down into a deep hollow, and the chair had to be dragged laboriously through soft and shifting sand. Then came a slight rise, firmer ground, a turnpike-road to cross, and Joe triumphantly drew his mistress on to the smooth gravel and up to the wide-open door of Dean's Hall.

Woodside was, indeed, a primitive region. Who ever heard of a host and hostess elsewhere receiving their dinner guests at the hall-door? Here, however, were



Mr. and Miss Norton, Mrs. Lansdowne and Bertie, all utterly regardless of cold, and, in the heartiness of their welcome, ready to rush out the moment the wheels of Mrs. Darcy's chariot were heard. She, indeed, needed somebody to help to release her, for she was swathed as tightly as an Italian baby. She was got out of her chair amidst much laughter, and brought in and seated beside a huge fire, while Nora and her father, in their turn, got rid of their wraps.

"Now, come into the parlour," said Mr. Norton; and, giving Mrs. Darcy his arm, headed the march.

There was no drawing-room at Dean's Hall. The room which would have been called so elsewhere, but which Mr. Norton preferred to call the parlour, opened from the hall, and occupied the whole end of the house. It was very large, therefore, and was not over-lighted by the two great windows looking south and west. Very pleasant places were the deep and cushioned seats in these windows, but at present they

were hidden by long and ample curtains of crimson velvet. The walls were wainscoted, but somebody had painted them white, and gilded, in dead gold, the border of grapes and vine-leaves carved just below the ceiling. Mr. Norton grumbled at the barbarism, but kept it up; only putting up the curtains, and surrounding the old-fashioned oval mirrors with crimson velvet, and using the same rich colour for the backs of the *étagères* which held his beloved china. This, he said, made the room look warm and comfortable, and was the only change in it since his birth. The spindle-shanked tables, the cumbrous but comfortable chairs, even the brass fender and fire-irons, remained as they had been left by a past generation.

This Christmas-eve the white walls, the ruby-coloured draperies, the duskily shining furniture, were all lit up by the most cheerful of all artificial lights. A huge fire, piled up of mingled coal and wood, filled the room with its warmth and brilliance; these fires were indeed common to the neighbourhood, and Woodside people were apt to

despise a mere coal-burning household as being niggardly and inhospitable. Nora, glowing from her walk, preferred to admire the blaze from a distance; her father and mother drew near to it, and for a minute or two a brisk talk went on about nothing. Then the sound of another arrival was heard, and part of the family rushed out, while the others stayed to entertain the first guests.

"We asked nobody but the Bennetts," Mrs. Lansdowne said to Mrs. Darcy, "and of course that nice young Forsyth. The Pritchards are away, you know, and Robert thought it would be pleasanter not to have anybody from a distance; so I'm afraid the young people will hardly be able to have a dance."

Bertie had been saying to Nora, "My uncle wanted to ask some people from Sunbury, but it seems a pity to break up old habits, does not it? We never have had anybody at our Christmas-eve dinners but just ourselves."

He spoke rather sentimentally, and senti-

ment always amused Nora; but still she agreed with the principle that strangers ought not to be brought into these accustomed festivals of *la vie intime*. "It is much nicer by ourselves," she answered decidedly.

And then "the Bennetts" came in—a portly Mr. Bennett, a comfortable Mrs. Bennett, Mariana and her betrothed, and her half-sister Clara, promoted for the first time to the honour of dining out. The party was now complete, though one-sided, there being but five gentlemen, while there were seven ladies; but that was nothing unusual in Woodside, and certainly nobody regretted the absence of the possible "people from Sunbury," who might have restored the balance.

How narrow, gossipy, commonplace the talk round the dinner-table would have sounded to a critical outsider; how pleasant, kindly, and restful it was to the talkers! Of all the people present the two young men alone were accustomed to any larger sphere than this, and they per-

haps were bribed to enjoy themselves. Alick Forsyth's frank, good-humoured face, which even Mariana did not call handsome, was enough of itself to have brightened up his side of the table ; and Bertie Lansdowne, sitting beside Nora at the opposite side, bore clearly written on his the satisfaction produced by doing something which was at once agreeable and meritorious.

What was rather odd about it was, however, that while Captain Lansdowne had distinctly made up his mind to marry Miss Darcy, and while he was, to his own consciousness and to that of his mother and aunt, paying willing court to her with that end in view, any stranger who might have merely seen and heard the looks and words of the two would have been quite as likely to take them for brother and sister as for lovers. There is generally about a courtship some kind of golden or rosy mist, some mysterious emanation which makes itself felt. The proverbial lookers-on are not to be deceived ; very often they can safely guess whether amusement or matrimony is the

proposed end of the game; but in this case they would have seen nothing. Nora and Bertie had dined side by side at the Dean's Hall dinner-table every Christmas-eve since she was twelve years old, and every Christmas-eve they had had a thousand things to say to each other, and had said them with abundant laughter and thorough enjoyment, just as they were doing to-night. Quite far on in the dinner something of this occurred to Bertie. He had not thought of it before, but it began to strike him now that, as he positively intended to propose to his old playfellow in the course of the next week or so, it would be proper to lead up to the great question by a more suitor-like behaviour. But somehow he could not begin to-night. It would be delightful when they were married, and settled down comfortably together; but how in the world was he to make love to her? He believed she would laugh, and was rather afraid he might too. The thing must stand over, at any rate, for to-night, and not be allowed to spoil their Christmas-eve.

After dinner the whole party returned together to the parlour. Four of the elders, by-and-by, sat down to whist, but "for love" only. Mr. Darcy had a positive objection to money, even sixpences, being lost or won at play. The young people played Pope Joan, and Bertie won everything, amid shouts of derision from the rest. Then the girls sang, and Mr. Norton brought out his fiddle, and tempted them to take two or three turns of a waltz, since no other dancing was possible; and finally they all sat round the fire, and told ghost-stories.

Mrs. Bennett, Miss Norton, and Mr. Forsyth each contributed a story, more or less commonplace; and the third had just ended in general merriment, when Mr. Darcy, who had been dreamily gazing at the fire, startled everybody by saying, "Your stories fail, because they want foundation. Your ghosts have not sufficient *raison d'être*."

"What ghost has?" asked Mr. Bennett, sceptically.

"Most old, and very few recent ones," Mr. Darcy answered, still quite grave.

"*Your* family must have a ghost," Mrs. Lansdowne ventured to suggest.

Mrs. Darcy looked less placid than usual. Her husband's family was one of her trials.

"Yes," he said, "the least awful one you can fancy."

"What is it?" was asked on all sides.

"A little child—a boy of six years old, with long golden hair."

"What a lovely ghost! Do tell us the story."

Mr. Darcy's face was no longer dreamy. He sat upright in his chair, considered for a moment, and then began,—

"In the Wars of the Roses, my ancestor of the period took the Lancastrian side. He followed Queen Margaret's fortunes steadily till they took her, and many Englishmen with her, into exile. In 1465 the Earl was in Burgundy, but his wife and children were safe and flourishing in his castle of Stanmore. There were three children — the young heir, who was the son of the Earl's



first wife, and a baby boy and girl, whose mother was the reigning Countess. The reason that this lady and her family were undisturbed was that she had been brought up in the household of the Duchess of Bedford, and was protected by the Duchess's daughter, who was soon after to be queen. One day, Lady Stanmore, with her three children about her, was standing on a balcony overlooking the moat (the balcony still exists, but the moat is now a flower-garden), when the eldest boy, going too near the low parapet, fell over and was taken out of the moat quite dead. The Countess was in great distress, and, while she was still in deep mourning for her stepson, another affliction came upon her. The Earl died in Germany, and her own little son of course succeeded to the earldom.

“But from that moment inexplicable things began to happen. The little Earl, placed in his father's seat in the great hall, was gently but irresistibly drawn out of it; when his mother bade him go with her to greet an important guest, he was firmly put

aside; when she took him into a great meeting of tenants and vassals to present him to them as their new lord, he was so strongly held back that she was obliged to give up her intention; and, being questioned, he always said that a boy with long golden hair held him back. The child showed no fear of this new acquaintance; on the contrary, he seemed to regard him as a friend. But the servants talked of the dead heir, and felt certain that, though the child was too young to remember his brother, it was really the poor little lord who came back to claim his rights. The Countess would show no fear, though she seemed to grow old and anxious very fast. Gradually she left off putting her child forward in any way, but he still spoke sometimes of the golden-haired boy who came to him. One day, when the young Earl was six years old, he was at play in the courtyard. The Countess wished him to be early trained to manly ways and amusements, and she had put him in what she thought careful hands. She herself was sitting at her window, which, like the

balcony, had a view of the moat. Suddenly she saw her child walking on the moat-side. It was a dangerous path, mossy and smooth, and overhanging the deep water. She called hurriedly to her woman to fly to the little one and bring him away, and leaning out of her window she watched him in agony, not daring to speak to him lest, hearing her, he should lose his footing. But, as she watched, there began to be visible *two* children walking hand in hand. They were precisely of an age and size; but the one who led the way was dressed in white robes of a strange fashion, and had long golden hair. At the very spot where the balcony overhung the moat the pair stood still. The golden-haired boy turned for a moment and looked up at the Countess; then he put his arms round her son, and in a moment the waters of the moat closed over them both."

Mr. Darcy paused. Everybody was listening breathless.

"And what became of the Countess?" somebody asked.

"She died of grief and remorse very soon

after. But before she died she confessed that she had pushed her stepson over the parapet, and also described what she had seen. And she left a prophecy."

"Oh, what was it?"

"They say she left it; at any rate it has come partly true. She said that the murdered child would appear before a death in the family (which is commonplace, and cannot be proved to have happened); and she also said that for four hundred years no Earl of Stanmore should be succeeded by his son."

"And has that been so?"

"Yes; there have always been brothers, nephews, cousins — plenty of relations to succeed, but never a son."

"Is the time up?"

"Nearly. My cousin, the present Earl, is an old man—a widower and childless. His brother, nearly as old as himself, died a year or two ago. He left a son, John Darcy, who is the heir, and the four hundred years is so nearly up that *his* son, if he ever has one, may have a chance."

Mrs. Darcy was far too courteous to interrupt her husband's talk, but she had been for some time of opinion that they ought to start homeward. She took the first good opportunity, therefore, to say "Good night." Everybody found out that it was much later than they thought, and all the visitors started out together. As they stood on the doorstep the church clock pealed out twelve, and hosts and guests wished each other a merry Christmas before they parted.

## CHAPTER III.

NORA'S steps as she walked home were not by any means so lively as they had been a few hours before. Even she was tired; and she was thoughtful, too, wondering over her father's story. Not, indeed, the story itself, but the strange thing of his rousing himself and telling it; the still stranger thing of its being as new to her as to the rest of the party.

As a rule, Mr. Darcy never talked; but the one exception to the rule was that in his study alone with Nora he talked a great deal. Many a quaint story taken from books he had told her, and his younger days had grown almost as familiar to her as to himself. She knew Stanmore Castle, and the very balcony whence the Countess had

pushed her stepson; she knew the late Earl, her father's grandfather, and the present Earl and his brother in their boyhood; she could have described Geoffrey, the Crusader, and Richard, the grey-haired Royalist, who died in Oxford; and her first love had been the later Geoffrey, who fought at Worcester; yet she had never heard the family ghost-story till to-night.

Another thing that she wondered over was why Mrs. Darcy looked uneasy during the telling of the tale. Mrs. Darcy did not like her husband's family. She thought that they had behaved to him with outrageous injustice, and she would have chosen never to hear them named. Nora knew this, and, moreover, shared in her mother's feeling (except as regarded past generations); but she could not help believing that it was not because of her antipathy to their relations that Mrs. Darcy had been so much disturbed. It was queer altogether, and meditations on the subject kept her busy most of the way home.

Once there, however, she was soon in bed

and asleep. For two or three hours she slept as she had a right to do after her day's work; then suddenly, just as the clock was striking three, she woke, perfectly and completely, and became aware that she had just had a singularly vivid dream. She sat up in bed, and, in the dense darkness of the winter night, recalled her vision by way of proving to herself that it was only a vision of her sleep.

She had dreamed that she saw her father sitting in his study among his books, while she herself sat near him, writing out for him an extract. She did not know what book she was copying from, but the words she was writing were,—“*Hæc ergo, carissinii, sic audiamus, ut qui vivunt vivant; qui mortui sunt, reviviscant . . . Nec ipse desperet; profundus mortuus est, sed altus est Christus. Ergo qui vivunt, vivant; quicumque mortui sunt, agant ut celeriter jam resurgant.*”

As she copied this sentence, the study-door opened silently. A little child, in a curious white robe, over which floated long



golden hair, glided in, and, going up to Mr. Darcy, took him by the hand, and drew him gently out of the room. As the door closed behind the two, the dream ended, and Nora awoke.

For a minute or two she felt awe-struck. The ghost-child had seemed so real, that the healthiest set of nerves in the world might well be a little disturbed. But a very short indulgence was given to fancy.

“How stupid of me to dream such nonsense!” She said to herself, severely. “I wish papa had never put it into my head. Come, I must go to sleep again directly, or I shall not be up in the morning.”

Accordingly she went to sleep; and when she next woke, Betty was giving audible proof that the day had begun.

The church at Woodside was always well filled on Christmas Day. Only one service was held, but to that everybody came who could. Yet there were no wonderful devices in evergreens, paper, or cotton-wool for the congregation to admire; even flowers were

unknown, and perhaps would have been considered Popish. But, to do honour to the festival, plenty of holly was discreetly used. In every window small sprigs were stuck against the panes; at every junction of the neat oak-painted pews a larger piece, looking very like a miniature currant-bush, was cleverly fixed. The sockets of the great chandelier each held a sprig of holly instead of a candle, and a sort of faggot of the same occupied the font.

As the first of the congregation began to assemble on Christmas morning, the proud author of all this splendour was always to be found in the church porch, ready to be congratulated and to exchange good wishes with his neighbours.

“A merry Christmas to ye, Muster Brooks.”

“A merry Christmas, neighbour. I’ve bin a-looking round to see as all is as it should be.” This is a hint to the new-comer to look round also.

“Well, that it is, Muster Brooks. And a dale of trouble you must a took. Beautiful

it is, and the bits o' holly a-growing out of the candlesticks quite natural."

Muster Brooks feels the praise to be pleasant, but just, and chuckles a little.

"Ah, I mout know how to do it," he says. "Five-and-forty year I've decked the church. Why, these ere pews bin all new sin' I won here. There wonnot a bit of flooring in the place, only in the gentlêfolk's seats, when I come, nor a place to put a candle. Lord! what with the pews and the galleries, and with being whitewashed three times, and with having clane white glass put in the winders, it's a different place to what I knowed it. But I've allers put the green in just the same."

Nora had often had thoughts of what might be done to improve the old church, which, very beautiful externally, had been so stripped and whitewashed within; but money was wanted for any important changes; and as to the mere question of "greening," as the parish called it, it would have broken Muster Brooks's heart to have dethroned him. Mr. Darcy did not mind

—very likely did not see—the currant-bushes, so Nora held her tongue and waited.

There had never been a brighter Christmas Day, nor a fuller congregation, than on the day after Mr. Darcy's unexpected fit of story-telling. The Bennetts mustered in such force that two of them overflowed into the Vicarage seat, where Nora and her mother were; and Bertie Lansdowne, sitting with the rest of the Dean's Hall party in their big square pew opposite, had a good opportunity of comparing Nora with the blooming prettiness of Clara Bennett.

Nora had a new dress of violet merino, and a bonnet to match, the colour being set off by a trimming and muff of swansdown. The swansdown was truly goosedown, and had cost nothing, except a good many hours of Mrs. Darcy's willingly bestowed labour; but nothing could have been more becoming, and Captain Lansdowne distinctly said to himself that he did not know a prettier girl than Nora anywhere, nor half so good a one, he added, by way of persuading himself that *that* was her great charm.

Whether he was more impressed by her goodness, or whether he was only more charmed by her bright eyes on that particular morning than he had ever been before, remained doubtful. One thing is certain, that, during the sermon, he seriously took into consideration the question of his asking her there and then to marry him, or trying to smooth the way to his proposal gradually. The grand difficulty which had presented itself the evening before was still unsolved, and seemed insoluble; in the case of such a gordian knot, what could be done better than to cut it? About the time when Mr. Darcy said, "From all which considerations we may conclude," it was being concluded just below his pulpit that he should be deprived, as quickly as possible, of his daughter, curate, and secretary.

Captain Lansdowne, however, could see no chance of carrying out his designs upon Nora without some little delay, and she was fated to have the first hint of them there and then. For, coming out of church, the two families met, and stopped for a minute's

chat, and, as they parted, Miss Norton indulged herself in a short aside, addressed to Mrs. Darcy. The dear old lady had her head full of her pet scheme of marrying the two young people, which scheme, she believed, she had nursed just to perfection. "How sweet Nora looks!" she whispered, with unintentional distinctness. "Bertie could not take his eyes off her. I hope it will be all settled directly."

Mrs. Darcy made no answer; and Nora did not feel it necessary to give any token of having heard; but she could not help asking herself *what* was to be settled. After all, the answer was not very far to seek; and, after giving the subject as much thought as she had time for while she took off her out-door dress and prepared for dinner, she found herself no way shocked or distressed, or even confused, and went downstairs smiling, and feeling quite as affectionate as usual to Captain Bertie.

Dinner was always early at Woodside Vicarage, except, perhaps, two or three times a year, when guests had to be enter-

tained. On Sundays there was an afternoon service, but not on Christmas Day. After dinner, therefore, Mrs. Darcy, who always required rest after a morning of exertion, was comfortably tucked up on her sofa, and Nora followed her father into his study.

"What shall I do, papa?" she asked, in her usual formula; but added, "Why should you work to-day?"

"I shall not do much," he answered, beginning to turn over his papers with his nerveless white fingers. "There is a passage of St. Jerome that I want for next Sunday, and I looked in vain for it yesterday: perhaps you could find it; see, this is the sense of it, as well as I remember."

He gave her a slip of paper, on which he had written the quotation he wished her to verify; and she, well drilled to the work, took down a big volume, and commenced her search. But Mr. Darcy did not, as usual, drop into a deep abstraction over his unfinished treatise on the 'Life and Labours of Archbishop Lanfranc'; he sat down and mended a pen, got up and searched for a

book, and, finally, went to the fire, and stood warming his hands at it. Nora saw that he was willing to talk, and she seized the opportunity.

"Papa," she said, boldly, "why did you never tell me that story?"

Her father did not need to ask what story; his own thoughts supplied the blank of her words. "Rather, why did I tell it last night? I ought to have remembered that your mother cannot bear to hear of it. No wonder!" he added, with his dreamy eyes looking sadly into the fire.

"Why, papa? I should like to know."

"Well, Nora, you are a Darcy, and ought to know your rights," the Vicar answered, with a smile creeping over his face. "Who knows but you may see the ghost-child, some day?"

Nora opened her lips to say, "I dreamed of him last night," but stopped herself for the present.

"I will tell you why I ought not to have spoken of it to your mother," Mr. Darcy went on. "Just six years ago, I came home



one evening about five o'clock. It was quite dark, and I went straight to the drawing-room to find you all, and to get warm. Your mother was not there; but you three" (Mr. Darcy's voice changed a little at that word) "were sitting at the table busy with some game. I sat down by the fire and watched you, and presently I saw a child in a white robe and with long golden hair—the child—sitting between your brothers, with an arm round each. The child's figure, even the light on its hair, were as distinct as any other object in the room; but it seemed gradually to melt away, and was gone. I told your mother what I had seen, and she said the warmth of the room had put me to sleep and made me dream it. But that year was the saddest of our lives."

The Vicar made an abrupt pause. Nora's eyes were full of tears for the unforgotten loss and sorrow of that fatal year.

"Poor mother!" was all she said, and she kept the story of her dream to herself.

Mr. Darcy spoke again presently in the tone of gentle authority in which he always

preached, and not unfrequently argued in private. "To deny the existence of what people call ghosts or *revenants* appears to me to be an unwarrantable presumption. Many persons of sound judgment have given most distinct evidence as to apparitions which they have themselves seen. Saul was visited by the ghost of Samuel; and there is, to my mind, nothing conclusive against the traditional evidence that many great families are warned of coming misfortune by supernatural means."

Nora listened in silence. She could neither contradict nor argue with her father. Her inexperienced but practical mind was much inclined to divide apparitions into three classes—dreams, indigestion, and nerves. She had not been four years mother-confessor to all the old women in Woodside without having encountered some of each kind.

While all was still indoors, there suddenly rose out of doors the sound of quaint, sweet music. Two boys, whom nature (to make amends, perhaps, for a niggardliness in other

gifts) had endowed with lovely voices, had posted themselves outside the windows and begun to sing. Well trained, these two might have been the pride of a cathedral choir ; left to themselves, they were the delight of their native parish when they sang, and alas ! its torment when they did not. Now they began one of the sweetest and best known of Carols,—

“ God rest you merry gentlemen,  
Let nothing you dismay ;  
Remember Christ our Saviour  
Was born on Christmas Day.”

Nora moved to the window to listen better. About the end of the second verse Mrs. Darcy opened the study-door and came in. She glanced round and said half apologetically, “ I thought I heard the children singing.”

Mr. Darcy drew a chair near the fire for her, and she sat down. Nora pulled the folds of her shawl more closely round her, for this was a colder room than the other ; then they all gave their attention to the boys.

The first Carol was sung through, and then a much livelier tune succeeded, and words to which the people of Woodside had an obstinate attachment,—

“As I sat on a sunny bank,  
A sunny bank, a sunny bank,  
As I sat on a sunny bank,  
On Christmas Day in the morning.

“I saw two ships come sailing by,  
Come sailing by, come sailing by,  
I saw two ships come sailing by  
On Christmas Day in the morning.

“And who do you think were in the ships,  
Were in the ships, were in the ships?  
And who do you think were in the ships,  
But Joseph and his Lady!

“He did whistle, and she did sing,  
And all the bells on earth did ring  
For joy that Jesus Christ, our King,  
Was born that day in the morning!”

Other singers came as the afternoon wore on—bright-cheeked girls, shamefaced boys more or less gruff, and one wavering-voiced old man who had been “a fine singer” in his day. Each one, old and young, went away with thanks and a huge mince pie; and so Christmas Day came cheerfully to an end.

## CHAPTER IV.

VERY often, in the years that followed, Nora looked back to that particular Christmas Day. It seemed to stand out in her memory as some high landmark, bathed in sunshine, does to the traveller, who, after passing it, has gone down into the shadowy valleys. Her existence was at that moment filled with all that makes existence *life*. She had work to do, capacity for doing it, and love as its wages; and, to crown all, she was ignorant of what lay before her.

She had been for a moment startled by her dream—for another moment when her father had spoken of the ghost-child's visit to the Vicarage; but the impression faded quickly and naturally from a mind unused

to such ideas, and she went on her way undisturbed. Of all gifts given to man, surely few are more blessed than that ignorance of the future so often bewailed, and which we try so vainly to pierce; for who among us would be strong enough for the battle of life if he knew, beforehand, the weight of the blows he should receive in it?

Nora Darcy went about her work next day, thinking nothing of impending evil, but certainly thinking a little of impending good. Bertie Lansdowne had put himself, or been put, into a corner of her mind where she found him every now and then when she had leisure to look for him. That particular corner had, about October and November, been occupied by her new winter dress: its present guest was more interesting, though not more exciting. As for her heart, her old playfellow had always had a place there, a good warm one, next to her dead brothers'; and there he was likely to stay, whatever happened.

He came to the Vicarage the morning

after Christmas Day, but Nora was already out, and was not coming in till dinner-time. He asked Mrs. Darcy whether she was likely to be going out again in the afternoon. Mrs. Darcy thought not, but could not be quite sure; and on the chance he came again, looking rather embarrassed, and bringing a book from his aunt as an excuse. But Nora was gone to see a child, which had fallen into a pot of boiling water, at the further end of the village; and he could think of nothing better to do than to walk that way in the hope of meeting her. As he went along, he decided that he would persuade her, on her way back, to make the round through some fields, which would finally bring them to the bottom of the Vicarage garden; and that, as they walked, he would get everything comfortably settled. He did not quite see why it was necessary for him to ask Nora whether she would marry him; he was quite sure that she would, and that it would be no news to her if he told her he wished it. He thought the chief thing to be decided was, when she

could be ready. About that he foresaw many difficulties, and occupied himself in planning how to get rid of them. It was a most lovely afternoon, clear and still, and bright with winter sunshine; and Captain Lansdowne, who had walked very fast from Dean's Hall to the Vicarage, dropped into a slower pace than he intended. The result was that, before he had gone half way, he saw Nora coming. When they met, he said, "Come for a walk, Nora: I want to talk to you."

But she was in a hurry. "I'm afraid I can't just now," she answered, "for I am going in search of something for poor little Polly Brown, who has managed to scald herself dreadfully. I am so sorry."

She said the last words after a glance at his face, and with a kind of mischievous consciousness. It had suddenly darted into her mind that he was thinking of "settling it," and naturally she enjoyed his disappointment.

They walked back together. The village street was not a very good place for love-



making, but still it was pretty quiet just at that time, and Bertie began to think he might as well speak here and now, and have done with it. He looked round, saw that nobody was within hearing, and began,—

“Nora, you won’t always be able to go on taking care of the parish in this way.”

“In what way?” she asked, half laughing.

“Nursing all the sick children and old women, and teaching in the schools, and all sorts of things. Don’t you think it’s time you began to do something else?”

“No: there is nothing else for me to do.”

“You might leave your old women and children,” he went on, with a decided touch of sentiment in his voice, “and come and take care of—”

Just as the word “of” trembled on his lips, a cottage-door close beside them flew open, and out bounced a cat, spitting and scolding furiously, and followed by a dog, which, in the blind fury of its pursuit,

rushed up against Nora, and then flew between her and Bertie, chased; in its turn, by a woman, who flourished a broom, and hit wildly at both the combatants. Nora, almost upset by the dog, was obliged to stand still to recover herself and to laugh; Bertie had to stand still too, but in a very bad humour, for what could be more utterly provoking than to be stopped in the midst of a declaration by a cat and dog? and, before he felt able to forgive the brutes, their mistress had recognized Nora, and was completely out of her depth in a flood of excuses.

"Lord bless you, Miss Nora, if I'd knowed it was you, they mout a fought inside. Ran right up against you, didn't he, miss? Drat the dog! I'll make his bones ache for it, if I catch him! It's all along of my Matthey, as will have him about the house. Won't you come in and sit down, miss? Ah, dear me! men are a deal of bother."

She might have gone on if Bertie, stepping forward into the light, had not startled

her into silence. The short beauty of the afternoon had faded into dusky twilight, and the road was only illumined now by the broad gleam that shone out from the cottage door. Mrs. Joyce, seeing a man's figure appear in this gleam, stopped suddenly; and Nora put in a quick "Good evening," and turned away. Again she and Bertie were alone on the road; and now, if he could forget the cat and dog, he might speak. He took a moment to consider how to begin. "What do you think of Mrs. Joyce?" Nora asked. "It is a pity you showed yourself just when you did, for you might have been the better for hearing her opinions."

"Awful nuisance!" grumbled the unfortunate Bertie. "I just wanted to ask you a question."

"Nora, is that you?" asked the voice of the Vicar out of the shadows on the opposite side of the road; and Mr. Darcy, coming up with his usual meditative step, quietly fell into line with his daughter, and added,—

“We will all go home together.”

This, however, was too much for human patience. Captain Lansdowne fled, saying, rather crossly, that, now Nora had another companion, he thought he had better hurry back to Dean's Hall. Mr. Darcy asked if he really would not come back to the Vicarage; and Nora, as she shook hands with him, could not resist saying, softly, to him, “Ah, dear me! men are a deal of bother!”

Two people went home dissatisfied with their afternoon's doings. Nora thought she had been disagreeable to Bertie, and that, as she certainly *did* know, and had known that morning, what he wanted to say to her, it would have been more honest and less *missish* to have given him an opportunity of saying it. She confessed to herself that she could have given him one earlier in the day, if she had chosen.

Captain Lansdowne plainly called himself a fool. He did not blame Nora; but he thought fate and his own stupidity had conspired against him. He was the more annoyed because he was going away from

Dean's Hall next day, to pay a visit at some distance. "I will write to her," he thought; and he did actually begin a letter, but it was never finished. "Well, it can't be helped," he said. "Better luck next time."

CHAPTER V.

“So Bertie is gone?” Mrs. Darcy said to her daughter the next afternoon.

“Yes; and the Pritchards are come back.”

“When?”

“Just now. They must have come to Bridge End by the two o’clock train, for Betty told me this moment that she had just seen them drive up the street.”

“Have they brought their niece with them?”

“Yes; at least, I suppose so, as Betty says there was a lady with a thick black veil on in the carriage beside Mrs. Pritchard.”

“Poor child! You must try to make her

like Woodside, Nora. When will you go to see her?"

"On Monday, I think, mother. This is Friday. We had better leave her one day to get used to her new home, before disturbing her. If it is fine on Monday, will you come?"

"Yes, to see Mrs. Pritchard. As for the poor girl, she will be sure to care a great deal more for a young visitor than an old one."

"I suppose she will be at church on Sunday. I must say I like to have a look at people before I am obliged to make their acquaintance."

Nora had her look at Phoebe Pritchard on Sunday, and went, with her mother, to call on her on Monday. The two girls were as unlike each other as a lovely nymph in marble is unlike one of Sir Joshua's English maidens. For regular, indisputable, and delicate beauty, nothing like Phoebe Pritchard had ever before been seen in Woodside. The very rustics stared at her open-mouthed. Even Mr. Darcy, who had

been something of a connoisseur in his youth, happening to let his eyes fall upon the exquisite face turned up towards him in pensive attention, almost lost the thread of his discourse, and was obliged to cough several times before he could find his place again. Nora could not quite decide whether she was glad or sorry that so splendid a star should have risen on her quiet world. She put off her decision till the first visit should be paid.

When Mrs. Darcy and her daughter were shown into the drawing-room at the doctor's, they were surprised to find Mrs. Pritchard alone. She was delighted to see them, and began at once to relate all that had happened to herself and her husband during their fortnight's absence.

They had found Mrs. Edward Pritchard, Phœbe's mother, very near death; and were able to make her last hours easy by offering to take charge of her daughter.

"And she is a very good child, dear Mrs. Darcy," added Mrs. Pritchard, "and a very pretty one, as you may see; but what she is



to find to amuse herself with at Woodside I really don't know. It's quite an anxiety to me already."

"She will be a nice companion for you," Mrs. Darcy suggested; "and Nora will be glad to do anything she can to make her feel at home amongst us."

"Well, Nora, my dear," answered the doctor's wife, rather dolefully, "I shall be thankful if you will. As for her being a companion to me, that is just the difficulty; for after having our house to ourselves for thirty years, the doctor and I do not seem to get on comfortably with anybody else in it. We should like to make her happy, but we don't seem to have the least idea how to do it."

"Is she at home?" Mrs. Darcy asked. "Nora came expressly to see her."

"She is upstairs at her drawing or something. My dear, if you would not mind going up to her, you two young people could have your talk all to yourselves. We have turned the blue room into a little sitting-room for her. You know it? Well, she is there."

Nora went upstairs to the blue room rather reluctantly, for she was afraid of not being welcome. When she knocked, a soft voice said, "Come in"; and she opened the door and saw Phoebe, who had supposed the knock to be that of a servant, bending over a table near the window, with drawing materials all about her.

"May I come in, Miss Pritchard?" she asked; and Phoebe, turning round, started up in great confusion, stammering, "I beg your pardon; I thought—"

"Mrs. Pritchard sent me up. I am Nora Darcy. I came to bid you welcome to Woodside."

Nora was not very much at her ease, but she was much less shy than Phoebe. After a minute or two, they were both seated, and getting through the ordinary questions and answers with tolerable propriety.

Nora could not help casting curious glances at the drawing which Phoebe had been working at. It was almost entirely covered by a paper, which was drawn over it; but it seemed to be flowers, as there were some,

apparently models, in a glass on the table.

"Do you draw much?" she asked, at last.

"I have tried all I could to learn," Phœbe answered. "I do not think I have very much talent. I can do flowers best."

"May I see what you are doing just now?"

Phœbe lifted the paper, and turned her work round for Nora's inspection. It was a water-colour copy of a bunch of spring flowers, which had bloomed before their time in Dr. Pritchard's little greenhouse: there were snowdrops and rich golden crocuses, very gracefully and daintily grouped; and the work was marvellous in its correctness and skilful execution. Nora, whose whole knowledge of art was derived from some few fine water-colour sketches which Mr. Norton had collected at Dean's Hall, thought it nothing less than a work of genius; and when she was able to take her eyes from it, only did so to regard its author with a respectful admiration. As a matter of fact, Phœbe

was infinitely better worth looking at than her drawing. She was dressed in a soft black stuff, which, though it was really made in the most ordinary fashion, seemed to fall in statuesque folds round a figure, every line and curve of which was perfect in grace. Against the dark garment the soft, dimpled, delicate skin, fresh and smooth as a baby's, looked its whitest, and the little head showed all its beauty of form under the coronet of red-gold hair that crowned it. Phœbe's beauty was of a type not then in fashion; but it was so great, and so charming, that it defied fashion. It was, in some respects, the kind of beauty which, now and then in the world's history, has driven men mad; but since Phœbe was really a good sort of girl, well and modestly brought up, it was likely to do no great harm in her possession.

Probably she had no idea how lovely she was. She may, very likely, have thought as Nora did, that the beauty she had read of in books was something quite beyond hers; something which was never to be seen in

Phœbe, who had the shallowest and most matter-of-fact brain ever assigned to anybody not absolutely foolish, was innocently posing as a young woman of talent; and Nora, quick witted, keenly intelligent, dowered richly with the rare *mens sana in corpore sano*, was, metaphorically, meekly sitting at her feet, dazzled by the glory of those "accomplishments" which she, herself, had had no chance of acquiring.

When Nora said good-bye to her new acquaintance, Mrs. Darcy had been some time gone home, and there was still a spare half-hour; so she turned to the left, instead of the right, and in a minute found herself at Mrs. Bennett's.

This house was as good a contrast as could be desired to Dr. Pritchard's. Mr. Bennett had had the luck, or skill, to marry two heiresses: the first had left him some money, and a comfortable provision to her only child, Mariana; the second had so much increased the family income, that the rapid increase of the family itself had been no cause of embarrassment. Half-a-dozen red-cheeked,

restless boys and girls had left their marks upon chintz and mahogany, but had no way disturbed the plump comfortableness of their mother, or the serene respectability of their father. Nora, knowing the household, was not surprised at walking into a perfect Babel in Mrs. Bennett's drawing-room.

All the family were there, except its head. Near the fire Mrs. Bennett sat knitting, her eldest daughter, Clara, sitting on her footstool, with her hands clasped round her knees, and her cheeks burnt to a deep red. Mariana was leaning on the back of her stepmother's chair, and Alick Forsyth stood facing them both. All four were deep in talk.

But outside of this sedate group all was noise and commotion. The two or three big boys and girls, whom Mr. Bennett was in the habit of calling the "Middle Ages," were occupied with a loud discussion, enlivened by pinches, shrieks, and roars of laughter. The three youngest had made a stage-coach of chairs, and were noisily going to London in it.

Through the riot Nora made her slow way, and had nearly reached the fireside party before they saw her.

"Guess the news!" cried Clara, jumping up.

"Oh, Nora, I'm so glad you're come!" added Mariana.

"Just in time to hear all about it," said Mrs. Bennett.

"Now we shall have a disinterested opinion," remarked Mr. Forsyth.

"What has happened?" Nora naturally asked.

"Let me tell her," said Alick, foreseeing another trio. "I have had the offer of a good appointment in Canada; and *we* are going out there in spring."

"We?" repeated Nora. "Do you want to take Mariana?"

"Well, naturally I think, I do."

"Oh, Mariana, Mariana! and you want to go?"

"Of course I wish it were nearer, but—"

"Oh, yes," cried Clara, indignant, "it's very well to wish that; but you'll go all the

same. I declare, Alick, I hate you, and your horrid bank, too!"

"Clara!" remonstrated her sister.

"I'm almost as bad as Clara," said Nora.

"It has taken my breath away, too, with surprise. Have you only heard about it to-day?"

"Only this afternoon. The letter was forwarded to me here," Alick answered.

"In fact, I have not yet written to accept; but I think I may go and do so now."

He looked at Mariana, but Mrs. Bennett answered,—

"Of course you may, as far as Mariana is concerned. We shall miss her dreadfully, and I dare say she will find it rather hard to leave us all; but she is ready to go, and we are ready to bid her God speed."

Mariana leaned forward, put her arms round her stepmother's neck, and kissed her. Neither of the two were far from tears. Alick and his future mother-in-law shook hands upon their bargain; and he went away to write his letter, leaving the women to talk in freedom.



Nora's half-hour was soon consumed. She reached the Vicarage punctual as the clock, but with her head in a strange whirl. The coming into her narrow circle of a girl such as Phœbe Pritchard, who seemed to her still more phenomenal in acquirements than in beauty, and the passing out of it of her dear and familiar friend into unknown and shadowy regions, were tremendous events. She longed to talk them over with her mother, and so clear her own ideas on the subject.

It was not, however, till quite late in the evening that she had leisure for talk. She had given Mrs. Darcy the mere fact of Alick Forsyth's appointment with her cup of tea; and when at last the day's work was done, she said something of her regrets.

"I shall feel dreadfully lost without her, mother," she said. "Next to you, she has always been my greatest friend, you know."

Mrs. Darcy thought of the possibility of Nora being herself swept into a new world soon, but she said nothing of *that*, only,—

"You need not cease to be friends, dear."

"I can't fancy what good a friend at the other side of the world can be to one."

"A friend at the other side of the world is much better than no friend," Mrs. Darcy answered, smiling.

When every word of her mother's had grown into a sacred memory with her, Nora remembered this saying; now she was scarcely inclined to agree with it.

"I wish you had seen Phoebe Pritchard," she said. "I am so sorry for her. She must be so dreadfully lonely."

"Did she seem to feel it? But she must, poor child, at present."

"She was painting some flowers. I never saw anything so lovely. Oh dear, mammy, I wish I were not so stupid!"

"Who told you you were stupid? Silly child, you have both will and power to do the work God has given you to do; and that is cleverness enough for anybody. Be content."

"I must have one other wish, then. I wish Phoebe were going to be married instead of Mariana."

ing the comfort of his own habitual lounge. Nora moved about, drawing the curtains, arranging the table, making tea. Nora, with her bright grace and good humour, represented the Active; Phœbe, with her delicate hands crossed and her perfect profile turned so as just to catch the best possible light upon it, was a lovely impersonation of the Passive. The Vicar was as well pleased as if some marvellous marble goddess had been suddenly added to the decorations of the homely drawing-room; and his wife and daughter saw that he was pleased, and liked Phœbe the better for it.

At this very time, however, Phœbe's mind was by no means so placid as her face. Mrs. Darcy had occupied part of the time, before either Nora or the Vicar came in, in satisfying the stranger's curiosity about the inhabitants of the little world of Woodside, into which, by her uncle's adoption, she had been so suddenly plunged. Having had several visitors, and having also used her eyes at church, Phœbe already knew a good many of her new neighbours by sight. Her ques-

tions had drawn from Mrs. Darcy a good deal about their circumstances and relationships; and she had heard of Mariana Bennett's approaching marriage, and how much she would be missed. Somehow, too, there had reached her consciousness, though not from any words of Mrs. Darcy, an idea that Nora was not without an aspirant; and, in plain English, she was tormented with envy.

As she sat there, fair and calm, winning golden opinions, she was far more wicked than she had ever been in her life before; and she had a guilty feeling that, if the three good people who surrounded her could have looked into her mind, they would have been shocked. Yet her mood was not, perhaps, very unnatural. She had been brought up by a mother who idolized her, and to whose life she was the centre and paramount interest; by this mother she had been trained, cultivated, *forced*, as it were, with the idea of being self-dependent. Suddenly she had lost love, lost occupation, lost importance, and the prospect of independence. She was placed in a situation for which by nature she

was fitted, by culture unfitted, consigned to a smooth, easy, silent life, and bidden to content herself with being nothing and with doing nothing. With her whole heart she rebelled; but her mother, at the last, had thankfully resigned her to her uncle's guardianship, and what way of escape was there for her except through marriage? and, for her, what chances of marriage at Woodside?

So she thought, but kept her thoughts carefully to herself. She was a girl to whom sweet ways and words came naturally, more out of a love of approbation than from any higher spring of courtesy; and she found the Vicarage, even with her dissatisfaction, a pleasanter place than her solitary sitting-room at home. Tea was a real meal in that unsophisticated village, and, when Nora announced that it was ready, all four gathered round the table sociably.

"I called at Dean's Hall this afternoon," said Mr. Darcy, presently. "Mrs. Lansdowne asked me to tell you that she is going away for a week."

"Mrs. Lansdowne going away!" repeated Mrs. Darcy.

"Well, that *is* news," added Nora. "She certainly has not left Dean's Hall for years."

"Where is she going?"

"To the place where Bertie is staying. He is going to remain there longer than he intended, so she has been persuaded, she says, to go after him."

"Then I suppose," said Mrs. Darcy, "he does not mean to come back here at all?"

"Yes: there's a month of his leave yet; and he is to bring his mother home on—let me see—to-morrow week, I think she said."

Nora was very much interested in this information. She would have been sorry to hear that Bertie was not coming back to Woodside, and yet she was not altogether sorry that there was a clear week between her and a possibility of that question of his being definitively asked and answered. She considered the matter gravely in the shelter of the urn.

Phoebe also listened with interest. This

"Bertie" was a personage who had not yet appeared upon the stage. She had seen Dean's Hall, and also the master and mistresses of it, and understood their importance in the parish. If "Bertie" were the heir, he might be of some importance too. She said,—“Is Mrs. Lansdowne the lady in a widow's dress, who sat next to us in church on Sunday?”

“Yes,” answered Mrs. Darcy; “and she stays at home almost as obstinately as I do. But Bertie—Captain Lansdowne—is her only child; and I suppose she wants to spend as much of his leave as she can with him.”

“Miss Norton made a good suggestion,” the Vicar remarked, putting an end to Phoebe's inquiries. “She advises that you should secure Miss Pritchard at once as Mariana's successor in the Sunday-school.”

Phoebe might have said quite truly that she had neither taste nor talent for Sunday-school teaching, but that would have been to make herself disagreeable; so, thinking Miss Norton a very officious person, she

smiled amiably, and said she should be very glad to do what she could.

When Phoebe was gone home, Nora had her question ready.

"Well, mother, what do you think of her?"

"She is very pretty—beautiful, even. Poor child!"

"But I don't mean her looks; I mean *her*. Don't you think she is very clever, very accomplished—all sorts of things, and like a young lady in a book?"

"Indeed, she does not strike me as being very clever; about the 'all sorts of things' I don't know. She seems to me a simple, good sort of girl, in a rather difficult position, and missing her mother terribly."

"I am disappointed," Nora said. "I have no doubt she is a good sort of girl, but I thought she was a great deal more. She will find Woodside dreadfully dull. I wish Alick Forsyth would carry her off, instead of Mariana."

"And what would Mariana say?"

Phoebe did find Woodside dull. No one



but herself knew how dreary and irksome were the long hours she spent. If Mrs. Pritchard had been hard and exacting, it would not have been nearly so bad. The being utterly left alone, without spur, without sympathy, supplied with every means of material comfort, but of no value to anybody, this was a kind of slow torture which could not by any possibility be borne for very long. While the first week or two were dragging themselves by, Phœbe said to herself, alternately, "All my life is to be like this"; and "If I could only escape!"

At the end of three weeks she was in a mood of utter despondency. Nora had not been able to be quite as kind as she had intended, for there had been several sick people to look after, and Mariana Bennett wanted her whenever she had an hour to spare. Thus Phœbe would have been left to herself, if Mrs. Darcy had not taken pity on her, and begged her to come and sit with her at the Vicarage whenever she liked. She came willingly, and had spent two afternoons there when Nora was absent,

during which afternoons Mrs. Darcy had arrived at a pretty clear idea of the girl's character, if, indeed, a girl of seventeen has a character.

What the Vicar's wife saw in Phœbe moved her pity, but did not attract her love. Under the sweet exterior there was a feebleness and a moral dullness which did not speak well for the girl's future. Mrs. Darcy made her discoveries, and kept her own counsel; but she said to herself, "I thank God that He has made Nora of stronger stuff."

Two people at the Vicarage took a positive dislike to Phœbe. These two were Betty and Joe. Both of them held this creed as firmly as the one they repeated in church, perhaps more firmly,—“I believe in Miss Nora, who is the best, cleverest, and prettiest young lady in England. Next to her, I believe in Miss Bennett, who is a real nice-spoken young lady, and knows what she is about.”

Betty, after her kitchen was tidied and herself “cleaned,” in the afternoons, would

sometimes admit Joe to the honour of a gossip. Joe, on these occasions, generally stood with his back against the wall, and his long arms stretched up over his head. Perhaps, as he stooped continually over his work, this attitude rested him. Betty sat with her knitting, almost always a long grey stocking, near the fire, and when she was in a very good humour, would grow quite confidential.

When Dr. and Mrs. Pritchard brought home their orphan niece, she was, of course, discussed through the length and breadth of Woodside; and, when she had been two or three times at the Vicarage, she naturally attracted the ponderous criticisms of the kitchen there.

"I dunna like her," said Betty, as she shook out a length of grey stocking-leg, and began to knit with sharp rhythmical clicks of the needles. "She's no more like our Miss Nora than chalk is like cheese."

"Lor! how should she?" growled Joe. "She ain't got no manners, not as how as I can see."

"Don't you be talking about manners, Joe, for you 've got none to spare yourself."

"Well, now, I just ax you," persisted Joe, "do you think as Miss Nora would a met anybody on New Year's-day and not said, 'Wish you a happy New Year'?"

"O' course not."

"I was a-going to the doctor's, New Year's morning," Joe went on, "and I met her just a-coming out. So I looks at her, and touches my cap; and, as sure as you're alive, she never says nothing,—not a word. Nor she's never said so much as 'Good morning, Joe,' all the times as I've met her about here."

"She's a rare stuck-up piece," said Betty.

"She's a good un to look at," Joe went on, impartially, "for all she's got red hair."

"'Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain,'" quoted Betty, with some scorn.

"Not but what Miss Nora's worth two of her," added Joe; at which Betty flourished her knitting in wrath.

"Now you just hold your foolish tongue, Joe Walters," she said. "To go evening

Miss Nora to the likes of her! Don't you know that Miss Nora's grandpapa was a lord? and she's a real lady, every inch of her. Miss Pritchard, indeed! You great oaf, how *should* she be like Miss Nora? If you were not as blind as a bat, you might see that she is just one of them half-and-half ladies as has got one way with 'em in the parlour and another in the kitchen; and I don't never want to see her in my kitchen, nor to hear nothing about her."

Joe beat a retreat at this point, and was careful in future what he said.

"'Tain't no affair of mine," he said to himself; "but I'd just as lieve she'd go back where she came from."

Meantime Alick Forsyth had left Woodside, and Mrs. Lansdowne and Bertie were still with their friends at the other end of the county. The preparation of Mariana's outfit was the great interest among the women. Her mother and sister had made up their minds that the resources of Canada were about equal to those of Central Africa, and that she must carry out with her every-

thing she could possibly require for the two years at the end of which she was to pay England a visit; accordingly they shopped, shaped, and sewed with tremendous energy. The shopping could only be done at Sunbury, eight miles off, and thither expeditions were constantly being made. Nora was carried off whenever it was possible, and only once did she and Phœbe spend any time together.

One day the two girls walked together to a farm some distance from the village. The glamour of Phœbe's beauty and accomplishments was still strong upon Nora, and she was ready to give her full sympathy to whatever Phœbe should say of her lonely position. They talked, however, chiefly of the bride elect and her departure, and only one saying called for Nora's compassion.

"It is a pity she should have to leave her people," said Phœbe; "yet I cannot help envying her. It is so sad to have nobody who wants you."

## CHAPTER VII.

ON the day of Nora and Phœbe's walk to the Hill Farm, Mrs. Lansdowne and Bertie came home to Dean's Hall. They had been staying at a pleasant house, full of young people, among whom were some very pretty girls; but Bertie's allegiance to Nora had not been shaken,—he came home resolved that he would be accepted (he had very little thought of any other possibility) before another forty-eight hours should have passed.

The following afternoon, therefore, he walked down to the Vicarage. He hardly expected to find Nora at home; but he meant to discover where she had gone, and either to try once more the plan of an out-

of-door *tête-à-tête*, or to manage to spend the evening with her, as might seem most promising. But he had no more idea of the form in which his fate was waiting for him than of what is to happen next century.

He had never in his life used the ceremony of knocking at the Vicarage door. He walked in as usual, and crossed the hall to the drawing-room. There he tapped lightly, and Mrs. Darcy bade him "Come in."

At that moment Nora was a mile away, and Phoebe Pritchard was at the Vicarage. She had brought that flower-painting which Nora had admired, intending to offer it to her as a gift; and, at the moment of Captain Lansdowne's entrance, she was standing holding it for Mrs. Darcy's inspection. She stood just within the great bow of the window, and all round her a flood of level sunlight poured in from the west. This illumination, dangerous to an older beauty, glorified her. The sombre colour of her dress was brightened, while the pure outline,



the exquisite tint and texture of skin, the golden gleam of hair, made her look

"A splendid angel newly drest,  
Save wings, for heaven."

This was the picture which Bertie Lansdowne, coming out of the twilight hall, found before his astonished eyes.

He came into the room like a man dazzled. The actual brightness of the setting sun had something to do with this, but still more the angelic vision. He had not seen Phœbe before, and as she stepped aside, and when Mrs. Darcy introduced them to each other, he had an odd feeling as if the girl whom he saw there in flesh and blood was not the personage of his momentary vision, but a sort of residuum only of it.

He sat down, as he had intended doing, and also, just as he had intended, asked for Nora: he said he would go out and meet her, and he said to himself that he would not be stopped by a cat and dog this time; and all the while he never suspected that these words and thoughts were but the

result of previous momentum, and that the vision he had seen standing in the sunlight had come between him and Nora for ever.

He sat down beside Mrs. Darcy; and Phœbe had shyly dropped into a chair on the other side. Mrs. Darcy had many questions to ask about Mrs. Lansdowne and the doings of the last fortnight. While Bertie answered them, his eyes were gradually assuring him that Phœbe only required to step forward again to reproduce the picture he had seen. The more he perceived this, the more interesting he found the investigation. Always intending to go, he stayed where he was. Half an hour had passed, and the sun had entirely disappeared, when he was reminded of the flight of time by Phœbe herself, who began fastening on her wraps, and preparing to say good-bye.

"You will not meet Nora now," said Mrs. Darcy; "or rather you will meet her at the gate. You had better stay, if you have nothing particular to do at home; and you too, Phœbe, you had much better stay

for tea, and give Nora your pretty present yourself."

Blind mother! It was in this way that the last hope of that desired marriage was destroyed. Mrs. Darcy never thought for a moment of the mischief she was doing. In her simple mindedness it never occurred to her that Nora could suffer by a comparison with anybody; but also, probably, if it had occurred to her, she would have said, "Any man who could prefer Phœbe to Nora is much fitter for Phœbe than for Nora: let her have him."

And she would have been altogether wrong. Very likely the Sirens made an end of many men who were quite as good as Ulysses, only not quite so cunning. *Amor vincit omnia* — including common sense, which is apt to re-assert itself later — sometimes too late.

Nora came in by-and-by. She was pleased to find Bertie there, and delighted with Phœbe's present. Her afternoon's walk had been satisfactory, and she was looking and feeling her best. As the four sat round

the fire, waiting for the Vicar, she thought it would be hard to be happier, and that all she wished was that time and circumstances would just stand still, and not hurry her on out of the known into any unknown, however tempting.

Mrs. Darcy, too, in her silent thoughts, was conscious of a holding fast to the present. It made her very happy to think of Nora's assured and easy future as Bertie's wife. This prospect relieved her of a dread, which had sometimes beset her, of her child ever being in any way a dependent upon the Darcy family. Still, Nora once married would be far less her own than now; she would be gone, and a most dreary blank left behind her. *Now*, therefore, was dear to the mother as well as the daughter.

As on the previous evening when they had sat together, Phœbe's thoughts were very unlike those of her neighbours. She had then envied Nora vaguely; now she envied her distinctly. She had easily identified Captain Lansdowne with that lover of whom she had had some previous intimation, and

she had so far enlarged her acquaintance with the politics of Woodside as to know that he was an excellent match for the Vicar's daughter. But Phœbe's nature could not rise to the generosity of being glad of a friend's good fortune, unless it were equalled by her own. "If he were not fond of her, there might be a chance for me," she thought; "and I have much more need to be married than she has." Bertie Lansdowne was, to her, simply "*un jeune homme à marier*," therefore a desirable property, a means of release from discomfort, a possible guide into a more congenial life. To do her justice, she simply repined; she had no thought of trying to rob Nora. The whole evening passed without it having occurred to her that Nora could be robbed.

And yet the evening passed, and Bertie said nothing to Nora of the subject which had really brought him to the Vicarage. If he had been very much in earnest, it would have been possible enough; but he was in no hurry. Nora seemed to have been pushed from her usual place in the foreground, and

Phœbe to have glided forward into it. He was very well content to sit and look at the beautiful stranger—so content that he did not care just then to do anything else. He thought it rather a bore when, after the Vicar had gone back to his study, Nora asked her guest to sing, and so deranged the graceful pose which she had been offering for his admiration. “Nobody looks well at the piano,” he was inclined to say; but Phœbe did look well, perhaps because it was impossible for her to look anything else, and he was obliged to confess that she sang well, having been carefully drilled in that, as in all else.

She sang in obedience to Mrs. Darcy’s selection, and consequently the songs were old ones—bits of Haydn, Cherubini’s ‘Ave Maria,’ and then, from an old book of copied songs, a very quaint, pathetic setting of Desdemona’s song—

“A poor soul sat sighing.”

Nobody could admire Phœbe’s music more than Nora did, yet it was while Phœbe sang

that a very curious and not pleasant idea made its way into Nora's mind. She thought, "What is the matter with Bertie? He is somehow unlike himself to-night. I could almost say, as Joe does sometimes, 'He looks mazed, like'; and I am sure he never was so silent in his life before, *here* at least. Is it Phoebe? He can be rather disagreeable now and then, when he does not like people; but he does not look as if he did not like her,—rather the contrary, I think. He admires her, I am certain, as he *must* do. But something is wrong. Perhaps, if she were not here, he would tell us."

No light broke on her puzzled thoughts. A little before ten o'clock Phoebe went home, and Captain Lansdowne could not do less than escort her. When they were gone away together, Nora could not help wishing Bertie had not been quite so civil. She would have liked to keep him for five minutes, and get the secret of what ailed him, little thinking that he was as much in the dark on that subject as herself.

He, for his part, conducted Phœbe to her uncle's door, bade her good-night, and went home to Dean's Hall utterly unconscious of the fact that he had deserted his old love and already entangled himself pretty deeply in the toils of a new one.

Nora, however, might think what she liked; her work would not stand still for her meditations. The next day was destined to be a specially busy one. Several of the neighbouring vicars and rectors were to meet at Woodside, and Mr. Darcy, on such occasions, always invited them to luncheon. Let anybody try to imagine what must be the result of inviting six or eight guests to a substantial meal in a house where there are no servants except a maid and a boy-of-all-work! Nora must order the luncheon, down to its remotest detail; Nora must see with her own eyes that what she ordered was forthcoming; and Nora, being scrupulous in the matters of plate and glass, was also in the habit of laying the table with her own hands. But on this particular day her accustomed share of work was not enough. While she



was labouring, duster in hand, to make the study presentable to her father's visitors, Joe's towy head was pushed in at the door with a terrible piece of news.

"Miss Nora, Betty's cut her finger welly off; it's a bleeding all over the kitchen."

Nora flew to the scene of disaster. There sat Betty, crying with fright and pain, and with the whole of her apron twisted in a huge bundle round the cut finger. With some difficulty, and innumerable "Ohs!" she got the bundle unrolled; and the finger, though by no means nearly off, proved to be very badly cut. She bandaged it, and consoled Betty; but the hand was clearly useless for the present, and there was no alternative for the "daughter of a hundred earls" but to turn cook herself in good earnest.

It was in emergencies that Nora proved herself to be, as Betty had said, "a lady every inch of her." She neither lost head nor temper. It was very unnecessary, she thought, that her father's guests should have

occasion to talk either of the poverty or of the bad management which prevailed in Woodside Vicarage. "Go to your mother, Joe," she said promptly, "and ask if she can come and help Betty for a few hours. As for the dishes, I shall see to them myself; and you must manage to wait at table without directions from me."

Then she went to Mrs. Darcy.

"Mother," she said, "Betty has cut her finger, and cannot manage all she has to do. Will you please try to do without me at table? and I will stay in the kitchen and act head cook."

"My dear child, what will people think if you don't make your appearance?"

"There's not a soul coming who will notice it; and they will certainly think you have got a *cordón bleu* in the kitchen, if you let me have my way."

"But what will your papa say?"

"For once, we must not mind what he says; but I will go and tell him."

She went to the study, where Mr. Darcy now was.

"Papa, which can you do best without at luncheon—me or the eatables?"

"My dear!" said the Vicar.

"I think I am the least important; so please don't ask for me, papa, and, if anybody else does, tell them I am *particularly engaged*."

The end of it all was that Mrs. Walters, Joe's mother, took Betty's chief work for the day, and that Nora's own capable hands prepared and sent in a luncheon which did no discredit to a country parsonage. The one bit of pride which Miss Darcy inherited was an insuperable dislike to being pitied on the score of poverty. "We *are* poor," she would say, "and every one of our pennies must do its work; but we are rich enough to want nothing, not even compassion, from people we don't care for."

This occupation of Nora prevented her from seeing Mr. Norton and Bertie, who were of the party at luncheon. In the afternoon she was obliged to go to the schools, and in the evening she and her father were at Mr. Bennett's. Phoebe also

was there, as it was a small party in honour of Mrs. Bennett's birthday; but Bertie had ridden home with the vicar of an adjoining parish, and did not arrive until after Mr. Darcy, who was tired with the day's excitement, had carried his daughter off.

In the course of the next few days Nora began to wonder whether she had altogether mistaken her old playfellow's meaning on the day when he had twice seemed to be on the very point of saying something important to her. If it had really been what she fancied, and what she knew perfectly well both his and her friends wished it to be, it seemed strange that he had allowed opportunity after opportunity to slip by. His leave was now just ending; in a day or two he would be gone from Woodside, and would, probably, not be there again for months. She would have liked to ask what her mother thought; but, although she had none of the feeling which makes a lover's name something sacred, unpronounceable even to the most trusted ears, she hesitated. "I am in no hurry," she said to herself.

"I suppose I shall know what he meant some day."

A little light shone on the question the day before Bertie left Woodside. Mr. Darcy wanted to call on Mr. Norton, and asked Nora to walk to Dean's Hall with him. They went accordingly in the afternoon; but the Vicar had delayed so long, that it was growing dusk when they turned in at the gate. From this point the house-door was full in view; and at present it stood wide open, with the doorway strongly lighted from within. In the arch, just leaving the house, was Phœbe Pritchard; a step below her, on the gravel, stood Captain Lansdowne.

"Oh, how dark it is!" Nora could hear her say, as she put out her hand in a pretty, helpless way.

Bertie took the hand to lead her down, but she still lingered a moment in the porch.

"Is the step deep?" she asked. "I am always afraid of the first plunge."

"Can't you trust me?" he answered.

"Do you think I would not take care of you?"

They had been so occupied with each other that Mr. Darcy and Nora had now come quite close to them unheard. That speech of Bertie's gave Nora a queer kind of shock. She stood still and cried out "Phoebe!" almost sharply.

But when she saw the sudden confusion that fell upon them both, she could not help laughing.

Phoebe stepped down into the darkness without any further hesitation, without even the aid of Bertie, who had dropped her hand.

"I am just going home," she said, rather hurriedly. "Miss Norton has been teaching me to net, and I stayed longer than I intended. You must not come with me now, Captain Lansdowne: I can go home quite well by myself."

"Nonsense," said Nora. "Good-bye, then."

"I was coming to the Vicarage to say good-bye," said Bertie, who was cool again

by this time; "or shall I find you here when I come back?"

"We are only going to stay a few minutes."

"You will find me with Mrs. Darcy, then."

Upon this the two went off together, and Mr. Darcy and Nora entered the house.

While the Vicar and Mr. Norton were talking, the twin sisters discoursed to Nora about Phœbe. It was not at that moment the most congenial subject; but one thing was evident,—if Bertie had any special admiration for Phœbe, neither his mother nor aunt suspected it.

"So it is probably all nonsense," said Nora to herself; "and yet," she could not help adding, "it did look very like a flirtation—and she is so very pretty!"

Bertie was found at the Vicarage, did say good-bye much as he had done dozens of times before, and next day was gone from Woodside, apparently as free from "intentions" as if neither Nora nor Phœbe had existed.

## CHAPTER VIII.

It happened that, on the day of Captain Lansdowne's departure from Woodside, Mrs. Darcy asked Nora to take a message to Mrs. Pritchard. Perhaps Nora would not have chosen to visit Phoebe at that moment; but, being forced to do so, she was rather curious as to how her new friend would look and speak.

For a wonder the aunt and niece were sitting together. Nora delivered her mother's message, and Mrs. Pritchard was obliged to go in search of the doctor, in order to consult him as to her answer. As soon as the two girls were alone, Phoebe said,—

“You startled me so last night.”

“Why?”



"Oh, I don't know; only I never thought of your being there close to us in the dark."

"Anybody might have been there."

"Yes, of course. Captain Lansdowne would not let me walk home alone."

"It was dark enough to make walking alone unpleasant, I should think, especially to a town girl like you."

"So it was. My aunt wants some curtains netted, and Miss Norton offered to teach me. That is how I had been there all the afternoon."

Mrs. Pritchard came back at this point with her answer, and Nora went home. As she went, she meditated. Why had Phoebe spoken as if in self-defence? What was there in her look and manner which was new? It seemed as if there was hovering about her beautiful lips the faint dawn of a smile, and her manner seemed rather demure than sad.

"How horribly ill-natured I am!" said Nora to herself.

Bertie went away on a Friday—the first

Friday in February. The weather, which had been unusually calm and bright through January, changed just at the change of the month. A keen east wind set in, alternating with rain; and nothing could be more wretched than the aspect of the country. Colds were caught by the dozen; bronchitis and rheumatism had a perfect carnival among the old and poor.

Nora, wrapped from head to foot in her shabby waterproof, had enough to do to visit all the sick people who wanted her. This, however, she did not mind. She was a good match for cold and fatigue; and, after all, the grand difficulty of such work as hers is to do it for those who are thankless.

Of that difficulty she knew scarcely anything. The parish, which considered her as its property, loved her as we love the things consecrated by that magic word "mine"; and she knew that she had but to show her face anywhere in order to find a welcome. But what she did feel as a serious trouble in this unhealthy season was that there were

things she could not do—ministrations to the sick and dying which must come from the Vicar himself, and for which he must go where they were needed and when they were needed. There was no possibility of saving him the long walk through dripping rain or piercing cold, which would take him to some farm or cottage where mortal sickness or death called him.

From these errands the Vicar always came in chilled in body, and depressed in mind. He would go into the drawing-room, where his wife was, and sit down opposite to her, as if he wanted her companionship. But, when he had answered her questions about the family he had visited, he would sink into a complete silence and immobility; so that sometimes Mrs. Darcy would think he was asleep, until she noticed his eyes fixed on the fire with a look of trouble which she could not understand.

He still worked in his study every morning. His sermons and his 'Life of Archbishop Lanfranc' occupied him as usual for some hours, but Nora knew that the 'Life'

was making no progress. Day after day the same sheet lay unfilled, and she had an almost complete holiday from her work of transcribing and translating extracts. She said nothing to her mother of this, nor even of something which made her still more uneasy.

One day, when she was with her father in the study, she noticed that he wrote a word, passed his pen through it, wrote it again, sat looking at it with a puzzled air, and then laid down his pen and looked at her. Meeting her eye, he said, nervously,—

“Come here, my dear, and read this last sentence; it does not satisfy me.”

She came, and read over his shoulder, much wondering, for Mr. Darcy had certainly never before asked criticism from his daughter. It was the conclusion of a sermon on Pride of Intellect, and the sentence just written was something like this:—

“Let us each suppose ourselves the possessor of an intellect as clear and powerful as any the world has ever known;

can we say,—‘As I know and judge to-day, so I shall know and judge to-morrow,—all the mental wealth I own now will be mine equally an hour hence’? No; for who shall assure us against the first step of slow decay, or the swift ruin of paralysis?”

“It is all right, papa, I think,” she said; “but it is a very melancholy idea. I would rather remember that great intellects do good and lasting work for the benefit of the smaller ones, than speculate on the chance of their breaking down before it is finished.”

The Vicar seemed strangely relieved by her answer.

“Do you remember the story of Gil Blas and the Archbishop?” he said, smiling. “Don’t presume too far upon my invitation to criticize.”

He took up his pen again, and she returned to her seat; but presently he leaned back in his chair and went on talking.

“The fact is that I begin to fear there is something wrong with my memory. It is very extraordinary that sometimes, when I want one word, I get another entirely diffe-

rent instead of it. I have been uneasy all the week from the idea that in my sermon last Sunday I said *δεσμνος* instead of *δεδεκως*. It was no use to ask Mr. Norton, for he was asleep; and I doubt whether anybody else in the congregation knows one Greek word from another. But it has annoyed me. It might have been in English, too, for I do find words slip away from my lips in a strange fashion."

Nora looked at her father in surprise and incredulity. This must be "papa's fancy," no unheard-of thing in her experience. Yet he was evidently deeply in earnest, puzzled, and distressed. She said, truly enough,—

"I have never noticed anything of the kind, papa. You have had more than usual to do and to think about lately, and you have got nervous."

"Well, my dear," the Vicar returned, in a more placid tone, "I hope that is all. In case you *should*—" he went on, hesitatingly, "in case I should say anything odd, you might tell me."

"I will be sure to notice, papa," Nora

promised ; and from that time she did notice anxiously and carefully her father's words, looks, and manner. She never once detected him in saying "anything odd"; but she saw him once or twice hesitate before pronouncing some word, as if to consider whether it was the right one. Still that only showed that he had fallen into a nervous condition, which was evident enough in other ways. He caught a bad cold, and was quite an invalid during the last week of February and the beginning of March.

It was in the last week of February that Captain Lansdowne astonished Woodside by reappearing there. He wrote to his mother to say that he found he could run down for a couple of days, and that, therefore, she might expect him the following evening. Miss Norton trotted over with the news to the Vicarage, and Nora could not help saying to herself, "Something is going to happen now."

It chanced that the elder people of the Woodside society were invited to dine at Dean's Hall on the evening Bertie had fixed

for his coming. The Vicar's cold had obliged him and his wife to decline; but the Bennetts and Pritchards were going, and one or two people from a greater distance.

"But as Bertie is coming," said Mr. Norton, "you may just as well ask the young folks for the evening. Alick Forsyth is down, and we shall not have him and Mariana much longer."

Accordingly, Nora and Bertie met in a room full of people. Perhaps she could not, certainly she would not, have said why she was rather surprised that he met her exactly as usual, that is to say, like a very affectionate and admiring brother. If she had had the very least hidden feeling of pique against him during his absence, it melted completely away while he spoke to her.

"It is delightful to see you again so soon," she said, heartily.

"An extraordinary piece of luck," he answered; "and still more luck to find you all here together."

It was an unmistakable fact that he did



not look at her when he said the last words. She saw it; and saw that his eyes had wandered to the other side the room, where Phœbe was standing. She almost laughed a minute after, when she watched him go up to the belle of the party, and speak to her, while her lovely face smiled upon him as it had never smiled upon 'anybody else since she came to Woodside.

Nora was obliged to confess to herself that she did not enjoy the evening much. She would have done so a great deal more if she had not felt somehow compelled to keep on watching Phœbe. To watch a flirtation is always an amusement to a disinterested bystander, but Nora's amusement had just too strong a flavour of personal concern to be agreeable. She was glad when it was over, and the Bennetts had dropped her at home. She was not sorry to find that her mother was gone to bed, so that there was no occasion for her to speak of her visit.

Next day, at one o'clock, everybody at Dean's Hall was asking for Bertie. The luncheon-bell had rung, but he was not

forthcoming, nor had anybody heard the few words exchanged between him and Phoebe, the night before, which would have accounted for his absence. He came in ten minutes late, and said he had been for a walk, which was all the satisfaction anybody got out of him until they left the table.

As they got up, however, he said,—

“Uncle, I should like to speak to you, if you are not busy;” and the two walked off together into Mr. Norton’s sitting-room.

“Well, my boy, what is it?” said the old gentleman, sitting down in his great chair.

Bertie had walked to the mantelpiece, and was pushing the vases and letter-racks into a mathematically straight line while he spoke.

“I wanted to tell you what I came down for.”

“Ah! to tell the truth, I thought something special must have brought you.”

“I came to see if I could get a wife.”

“Good; very good. And I suppose you have succeeded?”

"Yes."

"My dear boy, I am heartily glad of it. You could not find a better girl anywhere."

"No, indeed. But I am glad you think so."

"And then," continued Mr. Norton, rubbing his hands, "having known her all her life, we are quite ready—"

"Known whom, sir?" cried Bertie, interrupting.

"Why, Nora, of course. It is Nora, I suppose?"

"Good Heavens!" cried Bertie again, "I quite forgot Nora."

"Then whom are you talking about?"

"Phoebe, sir,—Phoebe Pritchard. I asked her this morning to marry me, and she said 'Yes.'"

At the mention of Nora's name, Bertie had turned from the mantelpiece and faced his uncle. His bronzed cheeks and white forehead were all one deep red of vexation. How could he have so utterly forgotten Nora?

Mr. Norton never looked at his nephew.

He took his spectacles from his pocket, rubbed them, put them on, took up the *Times*, and began to read. All this, however, was merely to gain time. Mr. Norton disliked speaking unadvisedly. After a minute, he held the *Times* lower, and looked over it.

"We all thought it was to be Nora," he said.

"So did I," answered his nephew. "Upon my honour, uncle, I do not know how it has come about; all I do know is, that Nora is one of the best and dearest girls in the world, but that it is Phoebe, and not Nora, that I want to marry."

"Very well, my boy. You know your own affairs best, and you are your own master. Perhaps you had better go and tell your mother."

Thus dismissed, Captain Lansdowne had nothing to do but to go. He found his mother trimming her plants, and began at once, with a dread of any further mistakes.

"Mother, I have a great piece of news for

you. Phœbe Pritchard has promised to be your daughter."

Mrs. Lansdowne looked at him, and then burst out laughing.

"Really, Bertie," she said, "you ought not to say such things; it is not fair either to Nora or Phœbe."

"Fair or not," Bertie answered, quickly, and in great annoyance, "it is true."

"True? *Phæbe*?" said Mrs. Lansdowne, her laugh giving place to a look of amazement and horror. Her son was not looking at her, but he answered almost sulkily,—

"Phœbe, and no other. I am not to be blamed for other people's mistakes, or my own either," he added, in a lower voice. "Mother, do you think Nora—?"

"I think nothing about Nora," Mrs. Lansdowne answered, decidedly. "It is you that I have a right to think about and speak about."

"But do be reasonable." He put his arms round her waist, and drew her away from her flower-stand to a seat. "If I love

Phoebe, is there any reason why you should object to my marrying her?"

"Oh, Bertie, Bertie!" his mother said, softened, but not the less troubled. "If anybody had told you a month ago that you would do this, would you have believed them?"

"No, it is true enough; I would not." He was silent for a minute, during which the vivid recollection of that twilight walk with Nora came clearly before his eyes. "I don't understand it now," he went on, presently. "I must have been a fool, though I don't think I was anything worse."

"I am afraid you have been foolish, my poor boy, and precipitate," Mrs. Lansdowne said, sighing; but she meant one thing, and he another.

"Don't say a word against Phoebe, mother," he answered; and, kissing her, got up to end the discussion. "It is all settled now; and you will be kind to her, won't you? You will not be able to help loving her, however much you may blame me."

Mrs. Lansdowne shook her head, but she said no more. And Bertie, with a miserable feeling of being in the wrong, went out of the house in company with a cigar, to smoke and meditate.

What Mr. Norton had said was quite true as to Captain Lansdowne being his own master. He had a sufficient inheritance from his father to live, and even to marry, if he pleased, without depending at all upon his uncle; though, in that case, the young household would be somewhat stinted. He knew he had no reason to fear coercion, and purposeless ill-temper was not the weakness of the Norton family, yet he was thoroughly vexed at the way in which his announcement had been received; conscience was a little uneasy, though it had no accusation to make, and he walked up and down, as discontented with himself and other people as it was possible for a newly accepted lover to be.

He saw Phoebe again in the evening, and received Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard's consent to their engagement. But even this was not entirely satisfactory; for, though pleased,

they were extremely surprised; and he felt that, though they said nothing of Nora, they were most likely thinking of her.

Before he had spoken to his uncle, he had intended to spend an hour at the Vicarage, and to tell Mrs. Darcy and Nora his news himself. But now, fully awakened to the recollection of what had been the position of affairs just before Phoebe's appearance, he began to feel that that was impossible,—in fact, to feel considerable dread of seeing Nora at all. The consequence was that, for the first time in his life, he left Woodside without having been to the Vicarage, or seen either the Vicar or Mrs. Darcy.

The news was brought to them by Mrs. Lansdowne and Miss Norton, who called, full of mixed and uncomfortable feelings. Mrs. Lansdowne wished to think that Bertie was blameless, yet felt that the Darcys might have a good deal to say on the other side. Miss Norton was full of suppressed indignation against both Bertie and Phoebe, and of sympathy for Nora.

“We have a great piece of news about



Bertie," said Mrs. Lansdowne, opening the subject. "He wished us to come and tell you, who are his oldest friends, first of all. He is going to be married."

"Bertie going to be married!" repeated Mrs. Darcy, with some incredulity.

"Yes—to Phœbe Pritchard. It is quite a surprise to us," said Mrs. Lansdowne, apologetically.

"Taken with a pretty face," said Miss Norton. "I used to think Bertie had some sense; but, old and young, rich and poor, men are all alike."

"You pay men a great compliment, Miss Norton," said Nora, "when you say they are all like Bertie."

Mrs. Lansdowne looked at the girl quite gratefully.

"Men certainly do judge differently from women," she said, "at least about the girls they want to marry. There is no doubt that Phœbe is excessively pretty; and I believe she is a good girl too," she added, more doubtfully.

"She is wonderfully clever," said Nora,

who still blundered a little on that subject. "I must show you the beautiful group of flowers she painted."

In this way Nora took her bull by the horns, rather to her mother's amazement. There was no character in the world more repugnant to her than that of a "*pauvre délaissée*." All her quickness and courage came to her aid when that seemed to threaten her. If she had really been attached to Bertie Lansdowne otherwise than in a sisterly fashion, pride would no doubt still have furnished her with weapons, but they might have been taken up at random and used too hotly. As it was, her heart was so little wounded, that she kept full possession of her head; and the two ladies went away from the Vicarage rather mystified, but still, all things considered, ready to swear that Nora would not have married Bertie, had Phœbe not existed.

That afternoon, as she trudged through a drizzling rain, Nora put herself through a final examination. "Am I heart-broken? Not a bit. Am I very angry with Bertie?"

Not at all. I don't think he could help it. I only hope he won't think it necessary to quarrel with me. Evidently, then, I am not a bit in love, and there's no harm done. Yet, to be quite honest, I am a little sorry. There would have been a good son for mother, and a home for her, if she needed it. Now I must begin to consider the future all over again."

## CHAPTER IX.

MARCH brought some alleviation of the sickness about Woodside. The east wind seemed for a time to have spent itself, and, though the weather continued cold, it was dry, and sometimes sunshiny. Nora had less to do in the parish; nevertheless, occupations multiplied on her hands.

The Vicar had never lost the bad cold caught a month ago. Probably the depressed state in which he had been at the time had given it a firmer hold, and, though his spirits had risen with the brighter days, he was very weak and wasted in body. He had never again spoken to Nora about his difficulty with words; but she knew, from slight signs, that he was still at times distrustful of himself. All this kept her vigilant and

anxious, the more so because she saw her mother's anxiety, and would have given the world to relieve it.

Mariana Bennett was to be married early in April, and she wanted as much of Nora's company as possible before their long parting. The whole Bennett household was overshadowed by the gloom of their approaching loss, for Mariana had been a model elder sister and daughter. She had taught the girls, kept the boys in order, and petted the babies; they all openly rebelled against any attempt on the part of Clara to take the soon-to-be-vacant throne, and Mrs. Bennett had a hard struggle to go on with the preparations for the wedding in the spirit of self-sacrifice in which she had first given her consent to it.

In this disturbed household Nora was always a welcome guest. She had been so specially Mariana's friend, that everybody regarded her as a sort of "double" of the bride-elect. Everybody, from Mrs. Bennett down to the youngest of the "Middle Ages," poured out their griefs and their secrets to

her; and she had scarcely time to think of her own loss, everybody was so very much resolved that she should think of theirs.

Finally, she had Joe and the garden on her hands and mind. Joe professed to "do" the garden; and very thoroughly done it would have been if he had been left to his own devices. He had certain fundamental ideas of horticulture, the chief of which was that the ground ought to be thoroughly dug as often as possible, without regard to any roots which might chance to be in it. In this way he had several times sacrificed Mrs. Darcy's and Nora's pet plants; and he was now strictly forbidden to touch a spade except by express permission. It was a daily temptation to Nora to say to her faithful aid, "*Surtout, point de zèle,*" but she was afraid he might not understand her.

In the midst of all these affairs she was scrupulous about not neglecting Phœbe. She had met her at first with a slight effort, which was made harder by a strong consciousness that Phœbe herself was not quite

easy. But that was at once got over, and Phoebe's visits to the Vicarage went on. The odd thing was that she, also, was beginning to prepare for her marriage, over which Mrs. Pritchard was excessively fussy. It was fixed to take place in June; and Bertie was already looking out for a house in London, where he hoped they might be able to establish head-quarters, at any rate.

Bertie had received letters from the Vicarage which had altogether removed from his mind any uncomfortable feelings. He had, therefore, nothing to do but to be in love as deeply as ever he pleased, and he certainly did not stint himself. Phoebe lived in a golden shower of presents, for, as Mr. Norton was going to furnish the house, and to give the young people an allowance, there was no need for him to economize.

Thus marrying and giving in marriage were the order of the day at Woodside; and Nora often felt that she should be glad when it was over, and she could have leisure to look her own future in the face, and consider how best to meet it. For her own

future, in her thoughts, meant the future of her passionately loved mother.

In old times Mr. Darcy had been fond of talking to his daughter on any subject that interested him. Sometimes she had delighted in this talk; sometimes she had been impatient of it. He had told her a thousand things about his own family; and when the subject was either the doings of long dead and gone Darcys, or the story of his own boyhood, she had been quite happy. But when he talked, as he was rather apt to do, about the present grandeur of the race, she listened with a distaste caught from her mother. Now, however, the Vicar might talk of what he liked; and in many a dreamy interval, when he leaned back, pen in hand, seemingly too languid to go on with the work which had once been his pleasure, she felt herself forced to listen to details which she had either not known or forgotten, and to put in order in her mind all those family circumstances which bore upon her present position.

The Darcys had never been a prolific



race; and, whether from the effects of the countess's curse or not, no earl for a very long time had been succeeded by his son. In the beginning of this century there reigned at Stanmore one of the best of the line, Geoffrey, eleventh earl. He had, of surviving relations, only one brother and two sons, and, mindful of the doom of the house, he encouraged both his sons to marry young. They obeyed him,—Geoffrey in 1803, John in 1808; and in 1811 they were both dead, and their father left to console himself with three baby grandsons. These were the two sons of Geoffrey—John and William—and Geoffrey, son of John. The earl took the three boys under his personal care and that of his countess; Geoffrey's widow came with her babies to live at Stanmore, and the little Geoffrey, who had lost mother as well as father, was the special charge of his grandmother. In this way the three boys grew up together. The young widow after a while married again, and to a great extent separated herself from her sons and their relations; and, when the old earl

died in 1826, young John succeeded to the title, and became the acknowledged head of the remaining Darcys. The new earl's brother and cousin were still boys. They continued to live at Stanmore, and to be the close friends their grandfather had trained them to be. This union lasted until the earl's marriage, and, although it began to crumble from that time, it might not, perhaps, after all, have been the fault of the young countess that it did so. She was certainly a woman of inordinate pride, and the idea that her husband might die, and be succeeded by his brother or his cousin, was enough to make both brother and cousin disagreeable to her. William Darcy soon found Stanmore less pleasant than formerly. He entered the army, soon afterwards married an heiress, and, having developed a talent for money-making, and found in his wife's fortune a *point d'appui*, he set himself to what was henceforth the serious business of his life, namely, getting rich.

Mean time Geoffrey Darcy had chosen the Church as his profession. There was one

very valuable living in the gift of the Earl, which had been generally held by a relation, and there were others of smaller value,—plentiful means, in fact, of providing for any Darcy who might enter holy orders.

Geoffrey did very well at Oxford, and left it with the reputation of being a wonderfully shy man, of blameless life, and an excellent scholar. But now his troubles began. The Darcys were poor, so poor that the old earl had been able to leave nothing whatever to young Geoffrey in addition to the dilapidated younger son's portion which descended to him from his father; and though this had mattered nothing while his expenses at school or college were paid out of the Stanmore revenues, he was destined to feel it a serious evil, for the young countess could see no reason why her husband's cousin should rob the children she hoped to have some day. A hint of her sentiments reached Geoffrey, and from that moment he refused all assistance from the earl, and even avoided being a guest at Stanmore for more than a few days at a time. Still, he

finished his studies and prepared for his ordination without any doubts as to the family living, which would probably have quietly descended to him but for a most unlucky event.

This event was his meeting with a girl, Mary Ravenscroft, who had the double misfortune of not having a drop of blue blood in her veins nor a guinea in her purse. She was the only child of one of the poorest of poor curates, clever, good, and pretty, but the last person in the world likely to be acceptable at Stanmore as Geoffrey Darcy's wife.

It must be owned, too, that he did not behave quite well in the matter. He persuaded Mary to marry him in ignorance of his circumstances; and he said nothing about her at Stanmore till he proposed to bring her over to present her, as his wife, to the earl and countess.

Instantly there fell terrible thunderbolts on the head of the unfortunate bride and her more blameable bridegroom. The countess declared that under no circumstances would

she ever receive "the person" Geoffrey had chosen to marry. The earl considered that it would be impossible to have Mr. and Mrs. Geoffrey Darcy established at the park gates if they were never to be admitted within them; and the end of it all was that Geoffrey and his relations parted company for ever, and, by the kindness of a college friend, he and his Mary became Vicar and Vicarress of Woodside.

The children the countess desired had never come to Stanmore Castle. She was now dead; and so were her brother-in-law, William Darcy, and his wife. There remained only six Darcys altogether,—the earl; William's two children, John and Eleanor; the Vicar of Woodside and his daughter, Nora; and a more distant cousin, Geoffrey, descended directly from the Vicar's great-uncle John. There was also one lady, a Mrs. Jermyn, who was a second cousin by her mother's side to the present earl.

These people were all the relations Nora had in the world. She had no love for any

of them, and the idea of ever seeking, or being obliged to receive, kindness from any of them filled her with horror. "They did not think my mother worthy to be regarded as one of them," she would say to herself, "and I am sure if she is not I am not." But still, now that her father's weakness had a stronger claim than ever before on her patience and forbearance, she began to feel, as she listened to him, that ties of blood are of some value, and that, if it were possible for her to know and make friends with her cousins, John and Eleanor, it might be well for her. They were innocent of any wrong to her mother. Their father she considered to have been as bad as the earl, but they had been babies at the time; indeed, Eleanor had only been born after the Vicar's marriage. "If ever I do endure any of my relations," she thought, "it will be Eleanor."

Nora was not sure how much her mother knew of Mr. Darcy's failing strength. Now that he was in brighter spirits, he had resumed so much of his general manner that

she thought it possible that Mrs. Darcy, who, rarely entering his study, had no opportunity of observing how his hours spent there had changed into hours of languid idleness, might not be so much alarmed as she was.

One day, however, she had an opportunity of judging more truly. Mr. Darcy had just gone from the drawing-room to the study, and she with him, when she missed her handkerchief, and returned to seek it. She opened the door very softly, hoping that her mother might be taking her daily half-hour's rest; but, to her dismay, she found her sitting, with her face hidden in her hands, in an attitude of the greatest distress.

"Mother dear," she said, softly, kneeling and gently drawing away the concealing fingers, "what is the matter? What troubles you?"

"Cannot you guess?" Mrs. Darcy asked, drawing her child close to her, and almost whispering.

"Are you anxious about papa?"

"Nora, I am *afraid to think*. You have never said that you were anxious, but, my child, do you think I cannot read your face?"

"He is better, dearest, ever so much better. He was too much worried while there was so much sickness in the parish, —that is all."

Mrs. Darcy shook her head.

"He is less depressed, but no better in bodily health. I doubt if he ever will be." Her voice was the merest whisper as she ended.

Then, although the words had not expressed it, Nora knew that her mother's fear was more terrible than her own. She had seen her father failing, and had only thought of gradual decay, of inability to do the needful offices of a priest, of long helplessness, and poverty made pinching by the greater need of expense; but she was struck dumb before the spectre of widowhood and orphanhood her mother had called up close in her path. Those terrible minutes when, for the first time, we are forced to picture to



Ellen Forsyth, and Jennie,—that is quite enough.”

“But, my dear,” urged Mrs. Bennett, “won’t it seem unkind to leave out the only girl in Woodside?—and such a pretty girl, too.”

“Mamma, I should really dislike it. I don’t know why, but she is ‘antipatica.’ Besides, remember she is in deep mourning.”

So the mourning was allowed to bear the blame of Phœbe’s exclusion ; but she was, of course, with her uncle and aunt among the guests. Mrs. Pritchard made her put off her black dress for the day, and, as she refused to wear the smallest scrap of colour, she appeared “clad in robes of virgin white,” an angelic figure, which would have utterly eclipsed the bride in any less loving eyes than those which surrounded her. The bridesmaids were in blue, which made Phœbe the more conspicuous and the more bride-like. The Vicar had not been so well for many weeks as he was on the wedding-day ; and, consequently, his wife and daughter felt freer from the weight of

apprehension. He read the service with his usual gentle dignity, and was quite ready and willing to enjoy the breakfast afterwards.

People have a great deal to say against wedding breakfasts, much of which is true. How can there be any enjoyment in a huge, crowded assemblage of people who care nothing either for each other or for the "happy pair," and who are further oppressed by a series of stupid speeches? At Mrs. Bennett's table the guests *did* enjoy themselves. They were but twenty in all; and they were really friends, or very near connexions (with the exception of Phoebe, who was pretty enough to be excused other qualifications). There were no speeches, and no tears. Everybody had been ordered to forget, for that day, the destination of the bride, and only to remember that she was to be back again in Woodside for May-day.

Early in the afternoon she and her husband drove away through a crowd of men, women, and children, who, having known her all her life, had come to wish her joy. And then the excitement was over.

The guests went home. Mrs. Bennett had recourse to her knitting until her eyes should feel strong enough for a novel ; and Clara lay down on her bed, and cried herself to sleep.

When the Darcys got back to the Vicarage, Nora felt much inclined to do as Clara Bennett was doing, for she knew the loss of her old companion would be grievous to her ; but she had some arrears of work to make up, and, after taking off her smart dress, she shut herself in the bare little room dedicated to club and other accounts, and devoted herself to her books. She went, about four o'clock, to give Mrs. Darcy her afternoon cup of tea, and, finding her alone, asked with some vexation,—

“Is papa gone to the study ? I thought he meant to take a complete holiday to-day.”

“He dozed a little here in his chair,” Mrs. Darcy answered ; “and when he woke, he said he would go and write a letter, and then come back.”

“Has he been long gone ?”

“Only ten minutes or so. He seems wonderfully little tired.”

"I will finish my work, then, before I look him up. Oh, mother, you never saw such a mess as the Clothing Club-book is in! I shall keep the accounts myself in future; it will be far less trouble."

"Cannot I help you?"

"I am in a fair way to get it straight now. I will ask for your advice about it this evening." She went back to her task, and struggled through the blotted and confused accounts for a much longer time than she had anticipated. The fading light stopped her, and reminded her of her intention to go and see if the Vicar wanted her.

"She put away her books, and went quickly to the study, to see if he was still there. He was; sitting at his writing-table, with a half-finished letter before him, and a strange expression on his face, as if he were sleeping with his eyes open.

"Papa," she said, "you promised to rest this afternoon."

As she spoke, and he turned to answer her, he seemed to wake up.

"I did, my dear," he answered; "and I

have kept my promise. I have done nothing."

"You should not have tried to write letters," she went on: "you were tired enough, I am sure."

"Yes," he answered; "the funeral this morning did tire me."

"Funeral!" was on Nora's lips, but she just checked herself in time. Her father was evidently quite unconscious of having said anything strange. "Won't you come into the other room now?" she said, quickly hiding the shock the word had given her. "Mother will be growing uneasy."

"Yes: I can finish this to-morrow."

He got up without saying anything more, and walked away to the drawing-room. Nora lingered. Her heart seemed to stand still; she did not know what to do, or how to face the idea of her mother's trouble at this fresh development of her father's illness.

"Perhaps I am frightening myself for nothing," was the first consoling thought that came into her mind. "Everybody uses one word for another sometimes. If he had

not spoken about it before, or if it had not been such a terrible mistake!"

Fear mastered her. She stepped to the table, and took up the half-written letter, which, contrary to his usual orderly habits, the Vicar had left lying there. It began, "Dear Sir," and was, apparently, to one of the principal parishioners upon some parish business; but the few sentences which were written were utterly unintelligible, from the incongruous words jumbled together in them. No doubt as to the propriety of reading the paper herself had troubled her in her perplexity; but she instantly felt that no one else must see it,—not even her father, if, to-morrow, he should be stronger. She tore it up into small shreds, and carefully burned every one, thinking meantime, "What shall I do? what *can* I do?" She looked at her watch. There was still half an hour at her disposal. She peeped into the drawing-room, saw that her father was comfortably seated, newspaper in hand, and her mother placidly sewing, and just stopping to say, "I shall

have done almost directly, mother," she ran upstairs, seized cloak and hat, and slipped out of the house unnoticed by anybody.

She almost ran through the churchyard and across the street to Dr. Pritchard's door. There she rang with an anxious avoidance of haste, and spoke to the servant who opened it, in the best possible imitation of her usual manner. She had often come at all hours of the day for advice or remedies for the poor; the doctor's boy saw nothing surprising in her visit, and when she said, "I want to speak to Dr. Pritchard," showed her into the surgery, and left her.

She stood looking out into the dusky evening till she heard the brisk step of the parish doctor coming, and then she turned hastily to meet him. "Ah, Miss Nora," said he, cheerfully, "I did not expect to see you again this evening. What is it? Another child scalded?"

"It is my father," she answered; and, in a moment, her face and voice showed that it was a serious matter which had brought her.

“Not ill? Overtired by this morning, perhaps?”

“I think so. But what I wanted to ask you is this—Do you know anything of a disease which makes people forget words—makes them say or write one thing when they mean another?”

“There is such a disease; or, rather, perhaps, such a symptom, known. But explain more fully.”

She told him her story hurriedly, but clearly.

“Do not frighten yourself, my dear,” he said when she had done, “nor let Mrs. Darcy frighten herself either. It is very distressing, of course, but may not prove in the least serious.”

“You know that people have been affected in this way, then, Dr. Pritchard?”

“I know it from reading. I have never seen a case of it. We have no great variety of complaints, you know, down here; and we are rather apt, perhaps, to be startled by a new one.”

“I thought I should be more comfortable when I had spoken to you.”



"You were quite right. However, we will say nothing to anybody else at present. I will see Mr. Darcy to-morrow morning, and I promise you that the moment I feel my skill not equal to the case I will tell you so."

"Thank you, Dr. Pritchard; I know I can trust you."

"You are a sensible girl, my dear, as well as a good one. If you were foolish, I should tell you your fears are foolish; as it is, I promise to do all I can to relieve them for good and all."

Nora got home again unperceived, and with some degree of relief. Once or twice in the course of the evening, the Vicar used words which she felt certain were not the ones in his thoughts; but they were not so glaringly wrong as to startle Mrs. Darcy. The worst thing happened as he was reading to them from the newspaper an account of a balloon ascent. "The unfortunate aëronauts," he read, "all received severe *benedictions* before the balloon could be secured." "'Benedictions'?" said Mrs. Darcy; "that is a

queer printer's error. 'Bruises,' I suppose, it ought to be."

"Yes, of course, 'bruises,'" answered the Vicar, with a troubled look, and no more was said; but, later, Nora assured herself that the printer had nothing to do with the mistake.

Dr. Pritchard called next morning, and had a long chat with Mr. Darcy. Nora had managed so as to be going out at the moment he left the study, and they walked along the churchyard together.

"I see no signs whatever of mental disturbance or brain disturbance," he said. "We have had a long talk upon all sorts of topics and he never appeared to me to talk more to the purpose in his life. Yet you could not have been mistaken?"

"I wish I could," she answered, sadly; and then related the slips of the previous evening.

"Perhaps," she added, "he is only affected in this way when he is tired."

"It would seem so. If you notice anything of the kind to-day, let me know; and I will make some excuse for coming

in to-morrow evening, instead of in the morning."

They parted at the churchyard, and Nora tried to take heart, or, at any rate, not to think of her anxieties until her day's work was done. In the afternoon, the Vicar spent a couple of hours writing. Nora looked over his manuscript afterwards, and could see no error. She coaxed him into the garden, which was gay with the later spring flowers; and as he walked round it with her, talking cheerfully, she said to herself, "How thankful I am that I did not give mother a fresh fright yesterday. Papa was simply over-tired, and had been half-asleep over that letter."

In the evening the Vicar complained of his eyes, and asked Nora to read aloud. Not a single thing occurred to trouble the quiet of the family, and Nora went to bed thankful that she had nothing to tell Dr. Pritchard.

## CHAPTER XI.

THERE was scarcely any renewal of alarm in the course of the next week. Now and then, Nora detected a sentence transposed, or a word misused, but only now and then. And she observed that her father seemed no longer to dread his own blunders, but to be quite unconscious of them. This one thing she had hidden from her mother, who did not seem to suspect it; in other respects the Vicar was certainly less suffering than he had been, and they congratulated each other on the improvement.

The next event of any interest to Woodside was the return of Mr. and Mrs. Alick Forsyth. They came back after a ten days' absence, so that Mariana might be with her

own people for a little while before the long voyage should separate them. After their coming, the days passed only too quickly, and the time for their going had arrived before it seemed possible to spare them.

The evening of the 15th of May—the last evening the travellers were to spend in Woodside—the whole of the intimate little society was gathered together at the Vicarage. Nora had told all her troubles to Mariana, and implored her to watch, and tell her truly whether she saw any change in Mr. Darcy. Mariana, on the other hand, had an interest of her own, of which she said nothing to anybody, in trying to decipher Phoebe Pritchard. It was wasted labour, for Phoebe's nature did not contain anything to decipher; but Mariana had a fixed idea that the girl was artful, when, in fact, she was only rather selfish and very cowardly. Phoebe would have been very glad to be friends with Mrs. Forsyth; she liked to be friends with everybody, and to be met everywhere with smiles and approbation.

Mrs. Lansdowne had adopted her future

daughter-in-law with a submission which had warmed up into something like satisfaction. She was so very pretty, and Bertie was so very much in love—Bertie, who, like the king, could do no wrong. Miss Norton had given in more reluctantly, and still grumbled that men were all alike. She had been wounded in her pride of insight, for she had always said distinctly that Bertie would marry Nora. Mr. Norton had been very kind about the engagement; but nobody had ever heard him say whether he liked his intended niece or no.

Mariana, always keeping her ears open to the Vicar's talk, amused herself with watching this group of people. She was the only person who had been seriously angry with Captain Lansdowne for what she called his inconceivable blindness and stupidity; and, though she would have been furious with anybody who should have spoken of Nora as jilted, or in any way ill used, she had a perfect longing to break a lance with somebody in vengeance for her wrongs. It was very illogical, but it was very like Mariana,

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and quite consistent with her being one of the best and most lovable people in the world.

Fortune gave her a chance for one small hit. She found herself sitting close to Phoebe, when the talk fell upon a story which was just then a matter of gossip in the neighbourhood. A servant-maid had committed suicide, in despair for the loss of a lover tempted away from her by her intimate friend. Everybody had something to say to the matter. Mariana waited till the others had spoken; then she said, with quiet distinctness,—

“I think the girl who killed herself was an idiot, and the girl who robbed her a murderess.”

Phoebe's cheeks were aflame. “Oh—h!” she said, as if the strong words hurt her.

“Don't you agree with me, Miss Pritchard?” Mariana continued, turning so as to separate her victim from the other talkers.

“But she could not know,” faltered Phoebe, uneasy in spite of herself.

“You forget; the story says,” answered

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Mariana, purposely misunderstanding her, "that all the neighbourhood knew. The friends seem to have made up their minds the unfortunate girl was to marry the man, just as we all expected that Nora would marry Bertie. You must have heard of *that*, of course?"

Phœbe lifted her head, and tried to say "No," but it was no easy matter to tell a lie with Mrs. Forsyth's keen eyes upon her. She looked so pitiful in her discomfiture that her enemy moved away, and left her to recover as she could.

The party, according to Woodside custom, dispersed early; but, just before leaving, Mariana said to Nora,—

"That girl is mean and untruthful. Pity Bertie as much as ever you can, for he will have bitter reason to repent marrying her."

With this oracular sentence she departed; and Nora said to herself, "What a craze Mariana has taken about Phœbe! Anybody else in the world would think Bertie very lucky."

The next day the young couple said their



last good-byes, and started for Liverpool, escorted so far by Mr. and Mrs. Bennett and Clara. Mariana left a crumb of comfort behind her, in the assurance she had given Nora that she saw no change in Mr. Darcy greater than might be accounted for by the obstinate cold, of which he had not been able to get rid since February.

Never, since the Vicar and his wife came to Woodside, had there been so much to talk about as during the last six months, for events which would have counted for nothing elsewhere were great in that quiet little world. The parish had a fine appetite for gossip, and was delighted with the meal provided for it. No sooner were the Forsyths out of reach than the other approaching wedding began to entertain the neighbourhood.

It was to take place in the end of June, and Phœbe's trousseau was getting ready. Mrs. Pritchard said, "We had adopted her, you know; and, of course, we expected that, sooner or later, she would cost us a good deal of money. Well, as she is going off our hands so soon, we think we can't

do less than send her handsomely fitted out."

To suit this liberal idea, dresses, bonnets, furs, garments of all kinds, were being collected at the doctor's house. For a few days after Mariana Forsyth's onslaught, Phœbe was shy of seeing Nora; but she could not be so long: it was absolutely necessary to have somebody to show her pretty things to, and to consult about colours and fashions.

Weeks slipped by smoothly in such pleasant occupations. Nora had long ago dismissed from her mind the first uncomfortable irritation of feeling herself supplanted; she was as friendly as ever to Phœbe, and could not, or would not, believe what Mariana had said about her bad qualities; she did begin, however, to have a pretty strong belief that it was not for love Phœbe had accepted Bertie.

"It is a dreadful shame, if I am right!" she said to herself. "He is over head and ears in love with her, and she *might* care more for him, poor dear boy!"

Nora and Clara Bennett were to be bridesmaids; in fact, Phœbe had no other girl friends, and they could hardly have refused if they had wished it. Nora did not wish it; she had both hoped and expected to be asked. But Nora did want some one else than her father to perform the ceremony. She had been so terrified the evening of Mariana's marriage, that she dreaded a repetition of that day. It was in vain, however, for her and Mrs. Darcy to beg that some one else might be found to take the duty. Mr. Darcy was one of Phœbe's earliest and steadiest admirers; and as he had never been in the plot to marry Bertie to Nora, he was extremely well pleased with the idea of marrying him to such a lovely and charming bride.

"We must make the best of it, my child," said Mrs. Darcy, with an anxious face. "I don't know that Mariana's wedding really did him any harm. He worked for a time, you know, that very afternoon."

"He was dreadfully overtired, mother," answered Nora, who saw no use in further

disclosures. "But he must have his way, I suppose."

He had his way, and they said no more. But one evening, about a week before the wedding, Dr. Pritchard received a hurried little note from Nora, which said,—

"I have had a great fright, and should be most thankful if you would make some excuse for coming in to see papa to-night. I went into the study a little while ago, and found him standing in the middle of the room, looking so strange and bewildered; and when I spoke he tried to answer, and could say nothing but random words without sense or connexion. I got him into his chair, and brought him some wine, and he now seems nearly all right; but we shall not be satisfied till you have seen him. Mother knows nothing of the difficulty of intelligible speech."

This note brought the doctor to the Vicarage without delay. He found Mr. Darcy on the sofa, and owing to a great feeling of weakness and depression. They had been talking together for ten minutes or so, when

one of those curious and alarming word-lapses of which Nora had spoken occurred. There had lately been published a pamphlet on a sanitary subject, of which the Vicar had received a copy. After telling Dr. Pritchard about it clearly enough, he called Nora, and asked her to fetch it, giving as the title something utterly disconnected with the matter. Fortunately she had heard the previous talk, and knew what to look for; but as she went into the study, her heart sank within her, and she could hardly command herself so as to come back promptly and naturally. She saw that the doctor was startled: she watched him as his talk with her father went on, and was certain that he was seeking some fresh indication of weakness; she trembled meantime lest her mother should catch the alarm.

Two or three times before Dr. Pritchard left, some sentence, or some single word, all astray, dropped from Mr. Darcy's lips. He seemed quite unconscious of it himself; but Nora thought Mrs. Darcy was not so. At last the doctor went away, giving the

strongest injunctions to all three, to see that the Vicar attempted no mental work of any kind whatever until he should see him again.

The next day passed quietly. Orders were obeyed, and Mr. Darcy did not enter his study. The day following was Saturday. Nothing would persuade the Vicar to relinquish his Sunday work to any one else; all he would agree to, was that Nora should look him out an old sermon for each service. He insisted upon spending a couple of hours in retouching these, and otherwise preparing for the next day; but seemed quite content to be nursed for the rest of the time.

On Sunday the services went on exactly as usual. Nobody outside the Vicarage had the least suspicion that they were listening to an old sermon. The Vicar did not look worse than he had done for some time past, and Mrs. Darcy and Nora had said little to any one of their anxieties.

But, on Sunday evening, Dr. Pritchard, coming in, as he said, for a little gossip, thought he saw cause for graver uneasiness

than before. He went away, saying that he should call next morning ; and when he did so, he began almost immediately to talk about the great desirableness of occasional change.

“If you and Mrs. Darcy would run up to London for a week, now,” he said to the Vicar, “it would do you all the good in the world. You would see old friends ; and I would give you a letter to my old master, Dr. Ferroll, who would look after your health meantime.”

Nora, all her senses tense with anxiety, caught instantly at the meaning of this.

“What a good idea !” she said, eagerly. “Papa, I am sure mother wants a change ; do think of it.”

Mr. Darcy looked from one to the other.

“Change !” he said. “Do you know that we have not been away from Woodside for a dozen years ? What should either of us do in London ?”

“Plenty of things,” replied the doctor, readily. “You have no business, for instance, to finish your ‘Life of Archbishop Lanfranc,’

without searching the library of the Museum yourself."

"That may be true," said Mr. Darcy; "but who knows that I shall finish it? I often doubt it lately."

"Another symptom of your want of change. I have not a single spark of the literary faculty myself, but I have always heard that it requires to be fed by contact with literary life. How can you get that in Woodside? My dear sir, my most earnest advice to you, both as a friend and a doctor, is, get somebody to take your duty for at least one Sunday, and start from here as soon as possible."

With these words, Dr. Pritchard left the room. Mrs. Darcy followed him out, and, leading him into Nora's little room, shut the door.

"Are you serious?" she said. "You know us too well, doctor, to advise an expensive journey unless you saw urgent reason."

"Yes," he answered frankly; "I do. And if I have urged the Vicar to go to London, it is really because I think that the only



way to obtain more skilful treatment than mine for him."

"He is very ill, then?" Mrs. Darcy asked, with a trembling voice.

"No, I hope not. Certainly, I see no reason for present alarm. But he is suffering in a way entirely new to my experience, and to that of most country doctors. It would be a very great relief to my mind, if he were in Dr. Ferroll's hands for a little while."

Mrs. Darcy held out her hand.

"No reason for present alarm?" she repeated.

"I see none."

"We will go to London, with as little delay as possible. Thank you, and good-bye."

Gradually, he could not have told how, Mr. Darcy was won over to the plot of his womenkind; but he absolutely refused to go before Wednesday—the day fixed for the wedding. Thursday, accordingly, was fixed for the journey; and great was the excitement throughout the parish at the news.

One of the clergymen from Sunbury undertook the duty for two Sundays; he would spend the Saturdays also at the Vicarage, for any additional services that might be required while Nora would stay at home and take care of the parish through the week. She would have been much happier, if she could have gone in charge of her invalids; but it was hard enough to find money for two,—three was out of the question.

On Tuesday the Vicar put together his MS., which he had resolved to take with him. Nora helped, and copied one or two scraps, on which he had jotted down extracts. All the papers were collected, when the Vicar, sitting in front of his desk, opened one of the drawers and pulled out an old pocket-book. "Oh, there is something I want in here," he said, turning over the leaves. "Just copy this, my dear, and I will rest meantime."

He gave her the book, and leaned back in his chair while she began to copy. As she wrote the first words, they struck her as familiar: she went on, and a past scene

seemed to rise in her memory—she, herself, writing these selfsame words, “*Profundus mortuus est, sed altus est Christus*,”\* and a white-robed boy, with golden hair, coming to her father, and drawing him away,—the scene which had so impressed her in sleep. She looked up in involuntary expectation. Her father was sitting tranquilly waiting for her work to be finished,—no beautiful, awful spectre was visible. She hastened to end the extract, and, with joy she was ashamed of, fastened the papers together, and hurried the Vicar back to the common life of the drawing-room.

\* St. Augustine, ‘Sermon on the Raising of the Widow’s Son.’

## CHAPTER XII.

THE second wedding-day rose upon Woodside in a mood most unlike the first. Clouds hung about the sky in the early morning, and gathered as the time passed. A thunderstorm was evidently at hand, and all that could be hoped was, that it would not break until the party had returned from the church.

Phoebe had a mortal terror of lightning. No arguments, neither ridicule nor coaxing, could persuade her to any kind of self-possession while there was a flash to be seen; and her aunt foretold, with horror, that she would scream and tremble at the very altar, if the weather gave her the smallest excuse for doing so.

However, the clouds still gathered, and still darkened, as the morning went on; and the sky was covered with angry masses, edged, here and there, with lurid borderings, which seemed ready to change into lightning at any moment. The party, much smaller than at Mariana's wedding, went into the church. The Vicar was waiting for them, and the service began.

As Nora stood near the bride, her thoughts wandered from point to point, not very cheerfully. It was impossible for her to forget how very nearly she herself had stood in the place Phœbe now occupied. It would have been a mistake, she knew; Bertie never had cared for her as he did for Phœbe; nor had she cared for him, except as a good and true brother. But, no doubt, at this moment, she felt that to have a faithful friend, who would be bound, both by duty and affection, to take a share of her burdens, would be a blessing beyond words to describe. She had felt already that Bertie's engagement had separated him from her. While his marriage was being cele-

brated, she was quietly saying a final farewell to their old brother and sister relations ; and there was a pang in this, as there is to every real sister, who has been greatly loved, when a stranger steps in between her and her brother. And, with all these meditations, there was the other still heavier one of her father's illness. How would this journey to London end ? Would the physicians, in whom Dr. Pritchard had such confidence, be able to fight this strange disease ?

Her thoughts had completely carried her away, when suddenly a dazzling flash of lightning filled the church, and instantly there followed one of those doubly and trebly repeated peals of thunder which seem to come from all parts of the heavens at once. Phoebe started and trembled, but managed to suppress a scream. Mr. Darcy paused for a moment, and then went on, rather hurriedly, with the service. But the storm had now begun, and raged furiously. Flash after flash, peal after peal, followed almost without intermission. No one could stand

unmoved ; and the bride, after showing infinitely more courage than had been expected of her, uttered a faint shriek, and fled from her place to the nearest seat. There was a general confusion. Phœbe sat crouching down, covering her face with her hands, and really half fainting with terror. - Bertie and Mrs. Pritchard alternately implored her to take courage, to return to her place, to be reasonable ; while Nora, forgetting her duties as bridesmaid, thought only of her father, and the effect upon him of all this extra excitement and fatigue.

For full ten minutes nothing could be done. The wild uproar of thunder, wind, and dashing rain filled the church, and every moment the gloom was broken by the blue glare of the lightning. Everybody was more or less disturbed. Mr. Darcy closed his book, and sat down. His wife, standing near to Nora, watched him with anxiety. At length there was a slight subsidence of the storm. The Vicar came forward again, and with authority bade the others return to their places. Phœbe still trembled, but she

dared not disobey. The rest of the service was read in the midst of noise which made it almost inaudible; and the guests, thankful that it was over, began to consider how to escape a drenching on their return to the house.

Mrs. Darcy hoped the Vicar would consent to go straight home, but he would not. All, therefore, crossed over together to Dr. Pritchard's; and as the violence of the storm was spent, and sunshine began to steal through rifts in the clouds, everybody's spirits rose, and the day promised to end more happily than it had begun.

The Darcys were the first guests to leave the doctor's house. There were still many things to be done in preparation for tomorrow's journey; and the mother and daughter, never yet separated, had a thousand things to say to each other.

The Vicar was very tired. He tried to excuse Phoebe's behaviour in the church, but it was evident that it had annoyed him, as want of self-control in anybody always did. At the earnest entreaties of his wife



and Nora, he lay down, and kept quite still for an hour, seeming to doze; but after that he got up, and said he must write a letter.

"The last, my dear," he added, to stop Nora's remonstrance. "I'll do no more, I promise you."

He went to the study, and Mrs. Darcy, going in soon afterwards, found him writing busily. She left him, and saw no more of him for about an hour. Nora was upstairs packing; and when she came down, Mrs. Darcy said,—

"Do go and try to bring your father away from his letters. He must have written half-a-dozen by this time."

Nora went to the study at once. As she opened the door, she saw her father sitting as he did when he was thinking over the next sentence to be written. He was leaning back, his head against the cushion of the chair, and the pen still held in his hand, which rested on the table. The whole attitude was most common, most customary, yet there was something about it strange

and full of a dreadful suggestion. She stood still, and said, "Papa!" in a voice which did not sound like her own; but there was no answer. "He is asleep," she tried to persuade herself, and went up to him softly. She lightly touched the hand that held the pen; the pen fell from it, but the fingers made no movement towards hers. "Papa!" she cried, louder; but there was no word or sign. Yet it was not death, for the otherwise lifeless body was warm and breathing. "Oh mother!" she whispered to herself as she flew to seek help. She found Betty and Joe together in the kitchen. "Joe," she said, "go and bring Dr. Pritchard *instantly*; and, Betty, come with me."

There was a wide old settee in the study, and on that Nora and Betty managed to lay Mr. Darcy. They had just done so, when Mrs. Darcy, surprised that Nora did not return to her, came from the drawing-room. "What is the matter?" she cried, hurrying to her husband's side.

"Papa has fainted, I think," answered Nora, falling upon an untruth in her anxiety

to spare her mother. "I have sent Joe for the doctor."

It was no fainting fit, as she perfectly well knew; and when Dr. Pritchard said "paralysis," both wife and daughter had anticipated the word. What they could not and would not anticipate was that this was to be the final parting, the death of their union. They told themselves and each other that the spell of silence and immobility would be broken, and that hope charmed them, as it has charmed so many of us through long watching and waiting, into patience and strength.

Next morning, going into the study for something else, Nora saw a letter lying upon her father's table, beside the paper on which he had last been writing. It was closed, sealed, and directed, quite ready for the post; and without doubt he had intended it to be sent off. Yet when she saw the address she hesitated, for it was to "The Right Hon. the Earl of Stanmore." For twenty years there had been no intercourse between the cousins. Nora's pride revolted

from the idea of trying to renew it. Why had the Vicar written that letter? What were its contents? Had he felt the shadow of death upon him, and written to his old companion to beg assistance for those he would leave so ill provided for? She shrank from the thought. The proud family who had rejected her mother was odious to her. Yet she dared not keep back the letter; and though she was certain that the sight of it would be painful to Mrs. Darcy, to send it without consulting her seemed wrong. Very doubtfully she carried it upstairs to ask what to do.

Mrs. Darcy was sitting by the bedside, where all the poor remains of her husband lay. She looked at the letter Nora showed her with surprise and a momentary doubt, and then she said, sighing,—“Perhaps it is better so. Have it sent to the post to-day.” And Nora submitted.

Slowly day after day passed, and one week, and another, and a third crept by with little change. Hope died out from the watchers' hearts, where it had never taken

firm root. They had learned to see the slight fluctuations that occurred without the wild thrill of joy the first had caused them. No light of life and recognition had shone, or was ever likely to shine, in those eyes, which, dim and half shut, seemed always on the point of closing in the long sleep of death.

The parish knew the Vicar was dying, and was saddened by the knowledge. Many who scarcely knew him fancied now that he had been their friend and adviser, and thought they should miss him all the rest of their lives. The halo his wife and daughter had woven round him stood him in good stead; and the man who for five-and-twenty years had been little more than a cipher outside the walls of church and study, was lamented and prayed for in his extremity as if he had been the model of a parish priest.

If sympathy could have been a help to them, Mrs. Darcy and Nora would have been fortunate indeed. Perhaps the proof of regard which touched both of them most

was a letter from Bertie Lansdowne. He and Phœbe were in Paris, but the moment he heard of Mr. Darcy's illness he wrote. "It almost seems as if it were one of my own boys," Mrs. Darcy said, when, through many tears, she had finished reading.

"He can do nothing for us," Nora answered; "but it seems natural and nice that he should wish to be of use."

He wrote that they would stay a week at furthest in France, and that once in England he would trust them to telegraph to him at any moment "to come and be useful." Nora wrote back a hasty note of thanks; but they sent no summons, as indeed it would have been quite useless to add another to the array of helpers already at hand.

In the dull routine of a sick-room the weeks passed, and no answer was received to that last letter. Perhaps it required none; perhaps it had been unintelligible; perhaps the Darcys were still unforgiving.

## CHAPTER XIII.

IN the height of the glowing summer, when the fields were white unto harvest, a stranger preached in Woodside Church from the text, "*And the reapers are the angels.*" It was no such sermon as had been common there ; no learned or eloquent discourse, but a very ordinary piece of declamation, frothy and flowery. Yet the preacher looked down upon few unmoved faces ; tears followed his words freely, for in every heart he touched a chord that was ready to vibrate. Not many hours before, a great majority of his hearers had followed their old Vicar to the grave.

At the Vicarage, where the long watch was over, with all its anxieties and fatigues,

a silence like that of death itself was reigning. Mrs. Darcy was utterly worn out—too much exhausted in mind and body even to feel acutely. She sat motionless, a book upon her knee, and her eyes dim with tears, which slowly gathered, were wiped away, and gathered again, almost without her consciousness. Nora, also, was in a state of strange inactivity. There had begun to rise within her the feeling which was to embitter her in many days to come—the feeling that she had lost not only her father, but her work, her place in the world. She had not yet expressed this feeling to herself distinctly, but she was gradually growing nearer to the recognition of it, and it depressed her unawares. She had not gone to the school, nor shown herself to the old women, who, according to Sunday custom, had their dinner in the Vicarage kitchen; the threads of habit, which had got broken, did not seem worth patching together only to be snapped a little later. Her life, with its abundant occupation, had been so happy; she had been used to feel herself good for so



much,—it had almost seemed as if the world of Woodside could not go on without her. And now it seemed as if her father's death had been the drawing out of the bolt that held all the fabric of her life together : all was confusion, and she did not know what parts to try to gather up for a fresh commencement. Only one duty remained to her quite clear and unaltered, and that was her duty towards her mother. But even here the sense of helplessness, all the more bitter for being new, made a misery out of what would have been a delight; for what could she do against the poverty that was coming?

It needed no great time or trouble to calculate the means of living that were now left to them. Their whole income would be £50 a year—the inheritance Mrs. Darcy had received from a godmother. Beside this, they owned a cottage near the church-yard gate, and had the furniture and books at the Vicarage. The cottage, bought some years back to make an old servant comfortable in her last days, was in good order,

and a *little* better, in the matter of accommodation, than the ordinary ones of the neighbourhood. It might be possible to live in it, if, as Nora anticipated, Mrs. Darcy decided to stay at Woodside. It would be easily furnished out of their stores; but when what they required had been taken away, what would the remaining contents of the Vicarage, old and well worn as every article was, be worth to sell?

Nora knew the exact cost of living at Woodside: she saw that their resources would not be enough to keep body and soul together if they depended upon them entirely. Yet they had to live; and more than that, Mrs. Darcy's weakness required care, delicate food, and warm rooms. The problem to be solved then was, how to increase their means.

And this problem so common, and so uninteresting to all but those forced to solve it, was one to which she could see no answer. She was as ready as ever to say, "One must do one's work," but what *was* her work now? In this quiet hour of self-communing, the first real bitterness of life came home to her.

Labour and sorrow she had known, but it had been wholesome labour, tender sorrow. Now, for the first time, she felt, though only in anticipation, the torment of seeing those we love better than life in suffering which we are helpless to relieve.

*E se non piangi, di che pianger suoli ?*

While mother and daughter, sitting silently side by side, were given up each to their own thoughts, the sound of the front door opening, and of a step in the hall, roused them at the same moment.

“It is Bertie,” said Nora ; and she moved to meet him.

Captain Lansdowne had already been two or three days at Dean’s Hall. He had come immediately on hearing of the Vicar’s death, and had been Mrs. Darcy’s agent in all that had been done since. He had taken the office upon him so naturally and so efficiently, that nobody had doubted for a moment whether he was the right person for it. But his leave was now at an end ; he was to start for London early next day, and this was his farewell visit.

He sat down beside Mrs. Darcy, and, taking away from her the book which she had not been reading, he forced her to talk to him. After a little while he came to the special errand with which he was charged.

"My mother is coming to see you to-morrow," he said, "but she and my uncle have ordered me to tell you her business beforehand. She is coming to beg you and Nora to move to Dean's Hall for a few weeks. It will be a capital thing for them all," he went on quickly, having once broken the ice. "Nora will do them all the good in the world; for they are all devoted to her, you know, and they want somebody to stir them up. And there is abundance of room, so that you can have your own quarters quite undisturbed, and keep to yourselves whenever you like that best. You will come, won't you?"

"You are all far too good to us as it is, Bertie," Mrs. Darcy answered, after a minute's pause. "If we don't accept this invitation, you may be sure we feel the kindness all the same."

"But you will accept it? Nora, persuade your mother to say 'Yes,' do. I promised not to hurry you; but to-morrow you will hear what my mother and aunt have to say. I shall be gone before you see them."

"You go straight to London?" Nora said, guessing that her mother wished not to make any hasty decision.

"Yes. I wish Phoebe would have come down here with me; but she preferred taking possession of our house, so she has been alone all the week. I had a letter from her this morning, and she sends her best love to you both, and says she will never forget all your kindness to her."

"Take our love back to her," Nora answered. "If we stay in Woodside, I suppose we shall see her here before long."

"I hope so; but we both expect you to pay us a visit by-and-by."

"Thanks; after this year, perhaps." Nora's eyes rested on her black dress as she spoke, but in her heart she had no special inclination to be Phoebe's guest.

The talk prolonged itself till the long day

was almost ended. In the twilight Bertie got up to go. As Nora went with him into the hall, he said,—

“I wish you would come round the garden with me once more, Nora. You may have moved from here before I see you again.”

She turned at once, and led the way into the garden where they had played together and worked together so often in the old days. There was the summer-house which he and her brothers had built, and where they had spent many a summer afternoon. There were the roses they had budded, and the apple-tree which, when she was quite a little thing, he had grafted for her, and on which later he had cut her name.

“I wish I had ever brought Phœbe round here,” he said. “She does not seem to know this dear old garden at all, and so many of my pleasantest days were spent in it.”

“I don’t think Phœbe cares for gardens,” Nora answered. “She is town-bred, you know.”

They parted at the door, and Nora went back to her mother.

“Mother,” she said, presently, “don’t you think it odd that Phoebe let Bertie come down here without her?”

## CHAPTER XIV.

BEFORE Mrs. Lansdowne and Miss Norton paid their visit to the Vicarage, Mrs. Darcy and Nora had fully discussed and settled the question of going to Dean's Hall. Their decision was against it, and that for several reasons.

"I believe we are allowed to remain here for a few weeks," Mrs. Darcy said, looking sadly round upon the old home; "and we shall be freer to make our arrangements here than we should anywhere else."

"I would rather not have two or three weeks of ease and leisure between the old life and the new," Nora said. "But, mother, you might go. I think it would be good for you, if you could do without me for a little while."



Mrs. Darcy answered by taking fast hold of her daughter's hand.

"I can't do without you, my child. I am a dreadful coward, but just now I feel as if I could not spare you out of my sight."

This talk led them a step further. They spoke of the possibility of leaving Woodside; but it was so evident that to tear Mrs. Darcy from the graves of her husband and children would be to renew most cruelly the griefs of her life, that Nora at once and completely set herself against the idea. Wherever Mrs. Darcy was, Nora must be also; that was not to be questioned. What remained was, therefore, that they should establish themselves in the Church Cottage, as it was called.

Their arrangements for the present went no further than this; but when the ladies from Dean's Hall arrived, they found so much fully settled, and were obliged to give up their own schemes in favour of their friends'.

"Nora, my dear," said Miss Norton, "this is the second time you have disap-

pointed me; and I assure you I feel it. If you had persuaded your mother to come, she would have done it."

"Indeed, Miss Norton, I did try to persuade her to go to you," Nora answered; "and as for the other time, that really was not my fault, you know."

"No! well, indeed, my dear, I hope it was not. Ah, the stupidity of men! They are all alike, every one; not a pin to choose."

The report carried home by his sisters brought Mr. Norton to the Vicarage.

"I am heartily sorry," he said to Mrs. Darcy, "that you will not come to us. We would have tried to make you comfortable, and every week you stayed would have been an additional pleasure; but, since you have decided for the cottage, we must say no more. However, I hope you will not refuse to let us help about your moving; so I walked down to ask you to let me go over the place for you, and see that it is thoroughly in repair, chimneys and doors in order, and so on."

This was not an offer to be refused; and when Nora went to the cottage on Tuesday afternoon to make a thorough inspection of it for herself, she found two or three of Mr. Norton's men hard at work, and Mr. Norton himself superintending.

"Ah, Nora," he said, when he saw her, "you should not have come yet; but, since you are here, come and give us your opinion."

She saw at once that he had taken her mother's permission in its fullest sense, and that if their new dwelling was not weather-tight, and faultless on the score of chimneys and drains, it would not be for want of trouble spent on it. They went all through it together, and then into the garden, where the Dean's Hall gardener was busy, with one of his aids, digging, pruning, and arranging, to get the little space into the nicest possible order.

"How good you all are to us!" she said, gratefully, as they turned back towards the cottage. "I am so glad we are to stay among our old friends."

"What would the parish do without you?"

Mr. Norton said, smiling. "I think we are all bound to do what we can to keep you among us."

But these last kind words sent Nora away saddened again. What had she to do with the parish now? The new Vicar would do all she had been used to do; perhaps she should have to watch the upsetting of all the plans she and her mother had devised and carried out. Even if the new ones were better, Nora did not yet feel heroic enough to be inclined to rejoice over them.

Though the family at Dean's Hall had been most prominent among the friends whom Mr. Darcy's illness and death had gathered round his wife and daughter, they had been so more from circumstances than from zeal. The Bennetts, also, had been on the watch to do any possible service; and, most unexpectedly, it was from Mrs. Bennett that Nora was to receive the substantial help which was to make life at the cottage really practicable.

Two or three days had passed; the new house was nearly ready for them, and the

*AGAINST HER WILL.*

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thought how to provide money to eke out their living had come to be a daily and nightly spectre haunting Nora's consciousness, when one morning, as she came out of the Vicarage gate, she met Mrs. Bennett coming in, and, altogether contrary to her custom, alone. She proposed turning back, but Mrs. Bennett said, "No; if you don't mind walking up and down here for a few minutes, that would be best; for I want to speak to you alone."

This sounded mysterious; and, as they turned and walked slowly along the broad churchyard path, the mystery did not seem inclined to solve itself. Mrs. Bennett began to talk of the terrible loss Mariana was to her, and then of the infinite trouble she had with her children.

"I never knew," she said, "until Mariana went what a plague a houseful of children could be. She could manage them. Poor Clara does her best; but either she wants the talent, or she is too near their own age, or something,—they mind her no more than the chairs and tables do. They are not bad

children," she continued, "nor stupid, I believe, but they'll never learn anything with Clara; that's certain."

"The boys *are* rather big for Clara," Nora said, not knowing what to say.

"Yes; quite too big. But Johnny and George are going to school. That is settled. They go to Sunbury on the first of next month."

"Then there are only Jenny, Kate, and Gertie in the school-room," said Nora.

"That's all. But Jenny will not learn with Clara. Poor Clara is in despair; and you must blame her, my dear, and Mr. Bennett, if I am doing wrong."

"I don't see anything to blame either of them for," said Nora, more and more puzzled.

"Well, my dear, it is just this. We thought that perhaps, after doing so much as you have always done, you might find a good deal of time on your hands now, and that perhaps you would not mind—as I know you get on so well with children, and I'm sure mine are as fond of you—and we don't like the idea of having a strange governess—"

"Do you mean that you would trust me to teach the children?" cried Nora, a light suddenly breaking in upon her.

"We shall be only *too* glad," answered Mrs. Bennett, enormously relieved at having got it said.

"But I never was at school. I don't know what things girls learn. You know papa taught me just as he fancied."

"My dear, I was at school ten years. I got all sorts of prizes. Why, I have three copies of 'Tupper's Proverbial Philosophy' at home now, all bound in blue and gold; there's one of them on the drawing-room table, you know. And when I was married I could not keep a housekeeping book! For the first six months Mr. Bennett was obliged to look over my accounts regularly every week, and one week I had entered the butter as costing 15s. a pound!"

"I think I can keep accounts," Nora laughed. "The parish has taught me that, at any rate."

"Mr. Bennett says," Mrs. Bennett went on, "that if he thought his girls would

grow up like you, he should be quite satisfied. But indeed, my dear, less would satisfy me: I have no wish that they should learn Latin and Greek."

"I don't know any Greek," said Nora, meekly, "and not very much Latin."

"Well, you'll think about it, then," added Mrs. Bennett, "and let me know. Oh, dear, so like me! I was quite forgetting—about two or three hours out of your morning, my dear, Mr. Bennett thought; and perhaps about £50 a year, if you liked it. And if you don't like it," she wound up in a great hurry, "you need say nothing to anybody, *we* shan't, you may be sure." With this and a hurried "Good-bye," the kind woman hurried off.

Whether she guessed what a lightened heart she had left behind her, Nora could not tell, but she thought it most probable. Here, in fact, was the plank at which she was ready, thankfully, to grasp. This doubling of their tiny income would make it possible for her mother and herself to live undivided. She had, of course, not a



moment's hesitation, herself, about accepting the proposal; but she must hear her mother's opinion before giving Mrs. Bennett an answer. She felt that other business might wait, and went back into the house to relate what had happened.

An aspect of the affair which had not struck Nora was the first to present itself to Mrs. Darcy. "Your father's daughter a governess!" she said, in dismay. Nora, with all her practical knowledge and sense, was singularly simple; for she had wanted money, and her heart had leaped at the prospect of earning it. She had utterly forgotten, till this moment, the degradation attached to that word "governess." There had never been, within the memory of man, a governess in Woodside,—it was pretty nearly an unknown species; and Nora was staggered for a moment. After that moment, however, when she had turned the matter rapidly over in her mind, she said, "I can't see any very great harm. I should make a better shopwoman or cook; but neither shopwoman nor cook is wanted in Wood-

side. I'd rather be a governess than starve."

The faintest dawn of a smile gleamed on Mrs. Darcy's face.

"I am afraid," she said, "that you forget you are the great-granddaughter of an earl."

"Much good that has done me," answered Nora, laughing outright. "It would count for something in a begging letter, no doubt; but we are not come to that yet. And, indeed, mother," she added more gravely, "I do not see why I should not teach the little Bennetts, and be just the same Nora Darcy as ever, if you don't object."

It seemed that nothing better could be done or suggested. Mrs. Darcy owned that on her, as well as on Nora, the idea of their necessities had been pressing heavily.

"So heavily," she said, "that I believe I should have put pride in my pocket, and written to some of your father's relations, if I had not remembered that last letter of his unanswered, unacknowledged."

"Dear mother," cried Nora, with a

shudder, "how thankful I am that you did not write. I think the first morsel of bread that came from their hands would choke me. No, no; let me work, let me do anything that is honest, and fit for a decent girl to do, rather than look for charity. What can there be half so degrading as that?"

The evening closed more cheerfully than any one had done since the sad day of Bertie's marriage. Nora wrote to Mrs. Bennett gratefully accepting her proposal, and only asking leave to defer her work until the move to the cottage should be over, and mother and daughter were able to face their future with some hope and thankfulness.

## CHAPTER XV.

NEVER was any arrival anticipated with less good will than that of the new Vicar to Woodside. Somehow, people regarded him less as the successor of the dead than as the supplanter of the living: it was "Miss Nora" whose cure of souls he was coming to undertake. Not a friendly eye was turned upon him when he made his appearance. "Ah, poor dear!" said the old women to each other, as they looked at the pew where Nora sat beside her mother.

Yet the new Vicar was the most kindly and inoffensive of human beings. He was quite new to the care of a parish; but he intended to do his duty thoroughly. Certain words of George Herbert were in his mind,

and commended themselves to him as a rule of life:—"The country parson is in God's stead to his parish, and dischargeth God what he can of his promises. Wherefore there is nothing done, either well or ill, whereof he is not the rewarder or punisher." He was unmarried, and meant to remain so, both because he was shy of women, and because he believed a single life more fitted for a clergyman. He had no extreme views, and was an excellent scholar, if not quite of so refined and critical a type as Mr. Darcy.

All this should have satisfied his new parishioners—and would have satisfied them, probably, if reason had had anything to do with the matter.

"He is a nice gentleman, I dare say; but what do he know about *us*?" said one.

"What do any gentleman know about your aches and pains?" rejoined another. "Ah, Miss Nora was the one!"

"Why should not Miss Nora do the same as she has always done?" somebody asked.

“Lord bless us! how can you be so foolish? Don’t you remember how she always said, ‘Papa says this’ or ‘the Vicar thinks that’? It was his reverence, poor man, that she worked for; and do you think it would be manners for a young lady to be going about the parish helping a strange gentleman?”

“He won’t want no help,” grumbled a fresh speaker. “He’ll be poking himself into our houses just like the parsons at Sunbury—you see if he won’t; and, ten to one, he’ll be asking a many more questions than you’ll care to answer.”

There was no doubt that the parish was hostile; not actively hostile, but passively so, with that slow, impenetrable weight of prejudice which belongs pre-eminently to the agricultural mind. At the Vicar’s first circuit among the cottagers, he found everywhere a laborious civility, and, as he thought, a dense stupidity, which sent him home horribly tired and dismayed. He could not comprehend how those women who had received him with such curtseys, and offered him a

newly dusted chair with such a good grace, had managed to send him away so entirely without information, and so distinctly impressed with the idea that he was unwelcome.

He was, by that time, established in the Vicarage. He had shown himself most courteous to the widow of his predecessor, doing everything in his power to make her removal as little painful as possible, and, indeed, being of real service to her by buying almost the whole of Mr. Darcy's library as it stood, and also the furniture she did not intend taking to the cottage. Mr. Bennett, who had arranged these matters, spoke highly in praise of him; and Mrs. Darcy, who had, as yet, only seen him in church, was thankful the living seemed to have fallen into such good hands. She and Nora were both looking forward a little nervously to his first visit. School themselves as they might, it was hard to see a new man in the pulpit where Mr. Darcy had preached for so many years; and, in addition to this, Nora could not help feeling rather like a dethroned queen. She almost hoped Mr. Piers would

call on her mother while she was away, yet she would have been sorry to miss him. She now went every day to Mrs. Bennett's, and had begun to get her work there well in hand. After mid-day she was at home, and she and her mother were quietly sitting together on the afternoon of Mr. Piers's second Monday in Woodside, when he knocked at the cottage-door, and was shown by Betty into the sitting-room.

It cannot be said that he came in either easily or gracefully, for he did not hear Betty's "Mind the step, sir!" and consequently floundered into the little room, stumbling so that his hat flew out of his hand, and rolled under the table. It was difficult not to laugh, but the accident was, perhaps, rather lucky than otherwise; for, seeing their visitor in the depths of confusion, both Mrs. Darcy and Nora forgot whatever might have made his visit painful, and thought only of setting him at ease.

There could hardly have been a greater physical unlikeness than between the old Vicar and the new. Mr. Piers was a tall



man, well made, but rather too stout for his thirty-five years; he had a fair, pleasant face, light brown hair and whiskers, loose limbs, and a hand which seemed as plump and boneless as a baby's. In manner there was an equal dissimilarity. Mr. Darcy had always retained the manner of his youth—that of a high-bred, somewhat old-fashioned man of the world. Mr. Piers had all the shyness of a recluse, and was as incapable of making talk as of squaring the circle. Moreover, though he had now been nearly a fortnight in Woodside, he knew nothing whatever of the manner in which the parish affairs had been formerly administered, and did not guess that there was not a man, woman, or child within his spiritual domain whose character one or other of these two women could not have laid open to him.

He did not know; and it would not only have astonished, but perhaps a little scandalized him, if he had been told. This was a man's work, a priest's work, he would have said; not to be trusted to a woman, far less to a girl.

He admired Mrs. Darcy; the singular sweetness of her smile, her eyes still bright with the purest light of intelligence and goodness, the kindness and grace of her manner, impressed him strongly. "A most charming woman!" he would have said, if he had had any intimate friend to say it to. But Nora was a mere cipher to him; by the time he got back to the Vicarage he was almost as unconscious of her existence as he had been two hours before.

He was going to dine at Dean's Hall that day; and it was at Dean's Hall that there was first conveyed to him the very slightest idea of the importance of the late Vicar's daughter.

"You have made acquaintance with the Darcys, I think?" Mr. Norton said to him, when they were alone after dinner.

"Yes; I called on Mrs. Darcy this afternoon. I did not go sooner, because, though we had had some business correspondence, I thought she might feel it a little painful to see me."

"She is quite a woman to understand

your consideration and to deserve it," said Mr. Norton.

"I am sure she is," Mr. Piers answered, as warmly as it was in his nature to speak to a stranger.

"I have never, in my whole life," continued Mr. Norton, "met with another woman as simply, and honestly, and consistently *good* as Mrs. Darcy. Was Nora at home when you called?"

"Miss Darcy?—yes."

"What did you think of her, if that is a fair question?"

"Really, I don't know that it is," Mr. Piers answered, with some embarrassment. "I know so very little about young ladies. I don't think she can have spoken much—"

He was so evidently at a loss, that Mr. Norton could not help laughing.

"Never mind," he said; "you'll know her in time. But, if you take my advice, you will not let anybody else know that you have not made acquaintance with the best, prettiest, and cleverest girl in Woodside."

If Nora had produced no effect upon the

new Vicar, so much could not be said as to the result of his visit in her mind. He was no sooner out of the gate than she dropped her work, and, covering her face with her hands, cried out,—“Oh, mother, mother, mother! why was not I a man?”

“‘That Heaven had made me *such* a man!’ do you mean?” said Mrs. Darcy, laughing.

“No, indeed. Did you ever see anything so *limp*?”

“His hand is ‘limp,’ I must confess; but he is not required to work with his hands.”

“And his way of talking—the slow, soft manner in which the words come out, as if they didn’t quite know their way, and were afraid of intruding where they weren’t wanted.”

“He is evidently very shy; but I rather like him.”

“Well, then, I have no more to say. But, mother, you must confess that he is likely to have a hard time of it with some of our dear people. Fancy an encounter

between him and Mrs. Joyce, or Betty Higgs, in one of her deaf humours!"

Nora's anticipations were even more correct than she guessed; and poor Mr. Piers found his first round of pastoral visits surpassed in difficulty and disagreeableness by those which followed. Armed neutrality was the mildest position assumed towards him by the cottagers. They were enjoying all the ease and abundance of harvest-time; they wanted nothing from the Vicar at the present moment, and, not being provident enough to consider that winter would come by-and-by, and make his good will essential to some of them, they saw no reason for suppressing the dislike they had taken to him. His manner was certainly unfavourable. There is nothing country folks dislike more than the look and manner Nora had called "limp." They will be perfectly tolerant of anybody who "enjoys bad health,"—indeed, bad health is rather a distinction, and Mr. Darcy had profited, not lost, by the reputation of it; but, if people are well, they expect them to be vigorous.

"I could a took and shook him," Mrs. Joyce, who was a strong-minded woman, said to one of her neighbours. "He's just like our old clock, as has got something wrong o' the inside; and when it comes to twelve o'clock, you'd think 'twas a-going to take all the rest of the day to strike. Dreadful aggravatin' 'tis. Well, I do assure you, he sat there and talked for half an hour, ding dong, ding dong, slower than the clock, and a deal less to the purpose."

"Ah, he talks to the purpose sometimes, though," said the neighbour. "Did you hear of Betty Higgs, how she answered him? She had not been to church two Sundays; so he goes to see her, and says he, 'You weren't at church last Sunday?' says he. 'No, sir, I wasna,' says she. 'Nor the Sunday before?' says he. 'No, sir,' says she: 'I'm rather deaf,' says she. 'You should come to church all the same,' says he. 'It's no good my coming when I can't hear,' says she. 'Oh, yes, it is,' says he; 'but if you can't hear in church, I'll come and read to you at home.' 'Much obliged,'

says she; 'but I can read to mysen. And I tell your reverence, plainly, it's no good coming here; for I wanna be druv to heaven.' ”

Somehow, in the course of the next week or two, the news of this encounter between the new Vicar and Betty Higgs reached Nora's ears, and made her very uncomfortable. She had at once and completely given up her rounds among the poor. At first, when she had left the Vicarage, and lost the practical control of the parish charities, she had had a pang of mortified pride, which had inclined her to say, “I can do no more for them; why should I go among them?” But this humour had soon passed away. Two other causes had kept her back: one was, that she and Mrs. Darcy were agreed in thinking that the Vicar ought to be left free to “work” the parish as he thought best; the other that, after her three hours' absence each morning, she was unwilling again to leave her mother alone in the afternoon. But now, when she had seen what manner of man the Vicar was, and how unlikely to

make head against unpopularity, and when rumours began to reach her which suggested that a sort of loyalty to herself was mixed with the perverseness of old Betty and her friends, she could not help getting fidgety and impatient.

Autumn was by this time near its end. Woodside, which had been in its greatest beauty a week or two back, now began to look dreary enough. The lanes were leaf-strewn and damp; the Vicarage garden, little cared for of late, was full of masses of sodden and decaying foliage, and the great beeches which grew along one side of it strewed it from end to end with showers of faded yellow. When the Vicar came out of his study, where the gloomy rows of books had not the familiar faces of old friends, and strolled into the once-cheerful drawing-room, he felt that he had but gone from bad to worse. He was not a sociable man; but he was tolerably alive to exterior impressions, and he began to regret the comforts of his college rooms, as well as the more satisfying routine of his former work. He regretted, but he



had no thought of trying to regain what he had lost. He had wedded his parish, and would make the best of it; though, like some other weddings, it seemed likely to turn out more of a plague than a blessing.

He had, by this time, paid a second and third visit to the cottage; but once Mrs. Darcy was out, and once other visitors were present, so that no talk of much interest had taken place. He had also met Mrs. Darcy and Nora at Dean's Hall,—for with such dear and intimate friends they continued their old habits of visiting; and had just so far opened his eyes as to see for himself that Miss Darcy *was* a pretty girl—a little too quick and decided in manner for his taste, but, nevertheless, very like her mother, whom he admired heartily. He saw more of Mr. Norton than of anybody else; and as perplexities increased upon him, and he found that, instead of making acquaintance with the mass of his parishioners, he was held more and more steadily at bay, he at last resolved to speak to him on the subject.

The answer, which a quicker-witted man

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would weeks ago have anticipated, fell upon him totally unprepared and amazed.

“If you find difficulties with any of the people, young or old, you can’t do better than consult Nora Darcy. She has managed the parish—or, at any rate, the poor of the parish—for three or four years; and I am sure she will help you with all her heart.”

## CHAPTER XVI.

PRIDE as priest, and pride as man, were both revolted. Consult Nora Darcy!—the thing sounded absurd. And yet it was prescribed as a sure way out of difficulties which he felt himself unable to overcome. He walked home thoughtfully, little inclined to follow the prescription. But as he sat over his solitary dinner, certain words came into his mind,—“If he had bidden thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it?”

Gradually his mood began to change. “Whatever Miss Darcy did,” he said to himself, “she must have done under her father’s directions; and no doubt Mrs. Darcy can tell me what his plans and ideas were.

But there is no trace of any organization whatever, that I can see. However, I will go and see Mrs. Darcy to-morrow."

Next day he arrived at the cottage about twelve o'clock; and, with many apologies for an early visit, told Mrs. Darcy, with a frankness which was in the matter of his speech, but certainly not in the manner, that being altogether unused to dealing with the class of farm-labourers and their wives, he found himself puzzled how to win their confidence, and that he hoped she would have the kindness to let him profit by her experience.

Mrs. Darcy smiled, and said it would be a real satisfaction to her to be of service to him; but that, having been an invalid for some years, her own acquaintance among the people was small. "But my daughter," she added, "has grown up among them, and knows everybody. She can tell you all about them."

"But the system of visiting, of administering the charities, and so on?" stammered the Vicar.

"I hope the books and other accounts reached you safely?" said Mrs. Darcy, in some alarm.

"Yes, oh yes; but they are very little help."

"Nora knows all better than I do," Mrs. Darcy went on. "The parish being small, and happily free either from great wickedness or great poverty, we always trusted more to personal friendliness with the people, for guidance in helping them, than to anything else. They will beg a good deal in winter; but, when you know them, you will be able to judge who really wants and who does not."

"They seem determined I shall *not* know them," said the Vicar; and rose in some bitterness to take leave.

Mrs. Darcy had watched him carefully, and was sorry for him.

"You think it strange," she said, "that I should refer you to a girl like my daughter. It is not her fault, however, if she has been forced into a position unsuited to her years, but that of circumstances. Meanwhile, if

she has the knowledge and experience which would be useful to you, why not take advantage of them? Forgive my plain speaking: I, at any rate, am an old woman."

"I am quite ashamed of myself," the Vicar said, his conscience loudly responding to Mrs. Darcy's words. "I will come and learn humbly and thankfully. When shall I find Miss Darcy at home?"

"Almost any afternoon. If it were not an unwarrantable interference with dinner, I would ask you to come and share our tea to-morrow."

"I will come with pleasure; and then, perhaps, Miss Darcy will explain to me, among other things, the character of a dreadful old woman, called Betty Higgs."

Mrs. Darcy laughed, and they parted the best of friends.

As Mr. Piers walked home, he felt more satisfied with himself than he had done for some time. He had found out what he was assured was the way out of his difficulty, and he had made up his mind to plunge into it; but he forgot, in the excitement of

the moment, the thorny hedge of his own shyness which he still had to get over.

He had, perhaps, never exchanged a dozen sentences with a young lady in his life ; and however practical and experienced Nora might be, her youth and prettiness were qualities far too much *en évidence* for him to lose sight of again. As the time for his visit to the cottage drew near, his resolution melted, and his comfort slipped out of his possession he did not know how. It was well for him that Mrs. Darcy knew beforehand what was wanted, for he was nearly tongue-tied when the moment for talk arrived.

The days were already cold, and it was pleasant to draw round the blazing wood fire, which filled the humble little room with its dancing light. Mrs. Darcy, knitting in hand, leaned back in her easy-chair. Nora, opposite to her, also held some scrap of work ; while the Vicar, between them, conscious of the comfort, but yet himself uncomfortable, hesitated whether to speak or to get up and fly.

Mrs. Darcy, however, came to the rescue.

She found out skilfully what he chiefly wanted to know. She guessed which of their neighbours was likely to have been most unapproachable. She drew Nora into talk so animated and so practical, that the fact of her being a young lady did cease to impress Mr. Piers, and he questioned, answered, argued, and disagreed as comfortably as if she had been a man. Having nursed matters to this satisfactory point, she let them alone. The Vicar had entirely forgotten himself, and showed his honest desire to do his work. Nora had forgotten both herself and him (no very difficult matter for her), and, delighted to talk of what interested her so much, gave him portrait after portrait, hint after hint. Time flew ; and when the church clock struck ten, they started out of their talk like people suddenly awakened.

When the Vicar went home, he said to himself, "There are exceptions to every rule. A practical woman, like Miss Darcy, who has both shrewdness and long training, would be a real help in a country parish."

It will be seen by this that Nora's trouble-



some personality had been, in the last few hours, fairly effaced from Mr. Piers's mind. She might have been, as far as he was concerned at this minute, a hard-featured maiden lady of fifty.

Very slowly and insensibly, but still really, the Vicar's unpopularity melted away after the alliance thus formed. Mrs. Darcy advised Nora to go to see some of the people, and to let it be known that the present Vicar and the family of the late one were allied and not rival powers. Nora took, of her own will, the further step of giving old Betty Higgs what she called "a good talking to" on the subject of incivility; and by-and-by Betty and her neighbours found out that, if they cared to please Miss Nora, they must *seem* at least well disposed towards Mr. Piers. They showed themselves very quick, after all, in taking in this idea; and probably it was the Woodside old women who first conceived the further one (far enough yet from either of the principals) that the Vicar's daughter might once again reign over them as the Vicar's wife. At

any rate, when they had once made up their minds to think the best, instead of the worst, of the new comer, things went on very much more pleasantly. They could not quite forgive him his shy, hesitating manner, nor the want of physical energy about him. "He's a poor, nesh creature," they still said, with a touch of contempt; but they found out that he was ready to take any amount of trouble for them, that he was liberal in gifts, and much more easily imposed upon than Nora had ever been; and they resolved to make the best of it.

While these revolutions and counter-revolutions were going on, the last months of the year slipped away. It was now six months since Mariana Bennett's marriage; and, as is so often the case, that change had seemed to be the signal for a perfect uprooting of the preceding state of things. Mariana was now settled in her Canadian home. Week by week long letters came, full of stories of her new life, of the country, which both she and Alick were beginning

to think delightful ; and of their home, which she was trying to make, in all possible ways, just such a one as they might have had in England. Week by week long letters went after her, with all the news of Woodside. She knew that Nora had taken her place in the school-room, and that the new Vicar had had a fight for influence in the parish which was not yet over.

The Bennett household flourished. Clara, relieved from the task of teaching, was often away from home, and delighted in her own importance as eldest daughter. Mrs. Bennett praised everything Nora did, or proposed doing ; and Mr. Bennett declared that the " Middle Ages " were becoming civilized under her rule.

The Pritchards, since Phœbe left them, had settled back into the enjoyment of that solitude *à deux* which was so dear to them. Her short stay in their household seemed to have left no trace behind. If they spoke of her, it was with a calm confidence in her present and future well being, which was the very antipodes of solicitude. Her short and rare

letters satisfied them fully; and they had no very strong desire that she should visit Woodside.

At Dean's Hall it was very different. A vague uneasiness had stolen into that cheerful household. Mrs. Lansdowne complained to Mrs. Darcy that Bertie's letters were shorter than they used to be, and that Phoebe never wrote at all. Miss Norton had quite given up her hard sayings *à propos* of her nephew, and was apt to call him "our poor Bertie." Mr. Norton had spent a few days in London, and came back looking harassed. After he came back, there was some talk of a visit from the young people, but they never came. Even Mrs. Darcy and Nora were without any positive information; but they began to understand that, in the opinion of Dean's Hall, Bertie's marriage had not been perfectly satisfactory. He wrote to Mrs. Darcy pretty regularly, and sometimes to Nora; and when they had begun to look for indications of uneasiness in his letters, they found them readily enough. At first he had spoken of

the effect of Phœbe's beauty among his friends, and his pride in her had been evident in every line. By degrees, he gave unconscious hints that she had an immense appetite for amusement; home, which was to have been a paradise to him with her, was evidently not a paradise to her with him. Later, he spoke of coming to Woodside; but it ended in, "I cannot leave Phœbe alone." Yet he had left her alone, by her own choice, when they had been but one month married; it hardly seemed likely, therefore, that it was her will which kept him with her now.

Nora did not know what to think about her old playfellow, but she had really little time for mere thinking about anything. Mrs. Darcy, in spite of her courage, had suffered severely from grief, and also physically, from the change of residence and circumstances. The Vicarage had been no luxurious abode, but it had contained many comforts unattainable in the cottage; and, do what she could, Nora found it impossible to make one hundred pounds a year provide

many delicacies for an invalid's table. Life was very hard to both mother and daughter as the winter drew on; it seemed to Nora that she could not be the girl who had been so light-hearted a year ago.

In the beginning of November, just after Mr. Piers had reconciled himself to the thought of a feminine counsellor, the letter they had given up looking for arrived at the cottage. The post at Woodside was rather late, and not particularly regular; letters, when they did come, often arrived after Nora was gone to her pupils. One day, coming in soon after twelve o'clock as usual, she found an immense square envelope lying on her mother's work-table.

"There is a letter I received this morning," said Mrs. Darcy. "Read it, and tell me what you think."

Nora drew out of the envelope a letter written on paper which resembled parchment, and bore printed on it, in gold, the coronet of the Earls of Stanmore. The writing was so like her father's that it almost startled her, and she read, with

an interest which cooled as she went on:—

“MADAM,—On my return from a prolonged and somewhat unsettled residence abroad, I found awaiting me the notification of the death of my cousin, your late husband, and also a letter from him, written, as I see by the date, within a few weeks of his death. The letter is almost unintelligible, giving a very painful impression of his feeble condition of mind and body when he wrote it; but I understand it to be intended to convey to me his fears of leaving you and his (I imagine) only surviving child unprovided for. In spite of the long and entire separation of my cousin from his family, the news of his death comes to me almost as a claim on my assistance; but mean time I am totally unacquainted with his pecuniary circumstances. As I should be sorry that his daughter, my young relative, should be reduced to poverty, I shall certainly consider it my duty to settle some small amount upon her, if you think proper to furnish me with particulars of her

and your present position.—I am, madam, though personally a stranger to you,

“Yours sincerely,

“STANMORE.”

A moment's silence followed the reading, and at last Mrs. Darcy was the first to speak.

“Remember that we don't know him at all, nor he us: neither of us is in the least qualified to judge of the other. He, perhaps, intended to show us all reasonable kindness.”

“Kindness, mother!” Nora cried, with red cheeks and flashing eyes. “Lest a Darcy should beg or steal, he will throw her a few pence to buy bread! And in what way does he treat *you*?”

The answering colour which rose to Mrs. Darcy's pale face showed that she had felt the blow aimed at herself, but she would not own it.

“Your father's family,” she said, “made up their minds from the first that I was an improper wife for him. They never saw



me, and their dislike had really nothing to do with me personally. Do not be more angry on my account than there is occasion to be."

Nora threw her arms round her mother, and kissed her passionately. "Your enemies are my enemies," she said.

"I have no enemies, my dear. But we had better leave this letter to be discussed later," answered Mrs. Darcy, with a smile.

## CHAPTER XVII.

ONCE or twice in the course of the next week something was said of Lord Stanmore's letter; but the more Nora thought of it, the more impossible it seemed to her that she could ever hold out her hand to receive the gifts of those who had treated her mother as an intruder, and herself as a beggar. Yet she could not hide from herself, that a time was perhaps coming, when she would be driven to such straits as to make help from some quarter a vital necessity. The utmost care and skill just enabled her, at present, to keep the wolf from the door; but she knew that any illness of Mrs. Darcy, by making her unable to leave home, would cut off half their supplies and bring terrible trouble upon her. When she thought of this, she tried to persuade herself that the

letter must be answered with becoming humility; but she never brought herself to this point without a sudden reaction, and a furious fit of anger against the monsters of injustice, she considered her cousins to be. Thus time slipped on, and no answer was sent, until at last, with a certain satisfaction, Nora could say, both to herself and Mrs. Darcy, that it was too late. She did not know, however, all the anxious thoughts her mother had bestowed on the same subject, nor how different trains of feeling had brought them both to the same conclusion. Mrs. Darcy, in fact, had for once acted without Nora's knowledge or assent; and this was what she had done. She had written two or three civil lines to Lord Stanmore, saying that, for the present, no help was necessary; she then sent for Mr. Bennett, her faithful adviser in all business matters, and showed him the letters. "I will not answer it fully," she said, "without Nora's consent, and that I feel sure I shall not have. But I want you to promise to write to Lord Stanmore in my name, as soon as I am dead."

Mr. Bennett tried to remonstrate.

"I shall not die any the sooner for speaking of it," she answered quietly. "I am sure you must often have occasion to tell people that, in reference to their wills. This is my will, of which I want you to be executor."

"I will do whatever you wish," said Mr. Bennett.

"Please do this, then. As soon as I am dead, write to Lord Stanmore, tell him shortly, how Nora and I have lived since her father's death, and how she is left. Ask nothing from him, but let him have the chance of renewing his offer, if he chooses."

Mr. Bennett promised; and of this compact Nora knew nothing. Nor did even Mr. Bennett know that Mrs. Darcy's conviction that her life was near its close had led her to make it.

Christmas came near. To Nora's surprise, Mrs. Darcy seemed to grow stronger in health and spirits as the winter deepened. The weather, though very cold, was dry and fine, and a few hardy flowers still lingered

in the gardens. The little Bennetts were to have a whole month's holiday, and Nora meant to do a thousand things during her leisure days. Mr. Piers had now fallen into a habit of coming to the cottage regularly once or twice a week. Nora had, long ago, seen that he would have liked her to give herself up, as formerly, to parish work, and she had frankly told him it was impossible.

"One must do one's work," she had said, in her old words. "I thought it rather hard when I had to give up my old business, which I had been trained to; but now I find my hands just as full as ever with other things. Make any use you can of me as an occasional help, but please remember I have only odd hours to dispose of."

So the Vicar came to talk over various affairs, and to get as much as he could of the fruits of her experience. It was a very odd friendship which was thus formed—one which had scarcely anything at all to do with personal qualities on either side, but grew altogether out of a community of interests. Personally, Mr. Piers still rather

preferred Mrs. Darcy to her daughter ; that is to say, he held fast to his first admiration. And Nora saw nothing whatever in Mr. Piers which would have tempted her to wish that he should find her attractive.

But there are always people who, seeing an unmarried man and woman interested in each other's doings, must needs begin to talk of matrimony ; and, of all the match-makers in the world (or, at any rate, match-imagers), there are none like the old women of a country place. When half the neighbourhood had made up its mind what was going to happen, a thunderbolt was suddenly flung at the feet of the unsuspecting Vicar by his old enemy, Betty Higgs.

"Well, sir," said she to him, one day, taking her short black pipe out of her mouth, and politely holding it behind her "you'll excuse an old woman bein' curious, but when is it going to be?"

"What going to be?" said the Vicar.

"Lord love your reverence, the wedding, of course."

"I know nothing of any wedding," he rejoined, trying to think whether he had published anybody's banns lately.

"Well now," Betty went on, "all the parish do say that your reverence is going to wed our Miss Nora, and I'd like to know when it's to be. She is a real beauty, is our Miss Nora, and as good as she is handsome. I never saw the man that was good enough for her, not to *my* thinking," she concluded, with a rather contemptuous look at her visitor.

But he, poor man, was safe from her contempt, in such depths of amazement and dismay that she might have talked for ten minutes and he would not have heard a word. He got away from her somehow, and walked home in a state of the bitterest humiliation. He had regarded himself as being as incapable of marriage as of forgery. If he had been told that his parishioners spoke of him as a forger, he would not have been more deeply wounded than he was now.

This was the light in which it struck

him. All evening and night, this was the way in which he thought of it; it was not until he sat over his breakfast next morning, that Nora's concern with the matter entered his mind. When he did think of her, he got up with a sudden exclamation of impatience; he saw at once, and truly, that, if the report reached her, she would be intensely annoyed by it.

It was horribly perplexing. What could he do? Certain it was that he could settle to nothing at home, and that he felt strongly disinclined to go among people who might repeat old Betty's question. At last he decided upon walking to Dean's Hall. Mr. Norton was his most intimate acquaintance in Woodside, and perhaps he might find an opportunity of saying something to him which would help to stop the gossip.

He was disappointed, on reaching Dean's Hall, to find that Mr. Norton was from home for the day; and he was turning away from the door when Mrs. Lansdowne came out and stopped him.



"If you are not busy, Mr. Piers," she said, "it would be so kind of you to come in. I wanted particularly to see you."

He followed her to the parlour, where she had been sitting alone, and found that she wanted to see him about some school-children in whom she was interested. Their business was soon despatched; and when it was over, she asked if she could give any message for him to her brother, who would be home that evening.

He said "No," and meant to go away immediately; but she, seeing that his mind was full of some troublesome matter, bethought herself that possibly she might serve as confessor just as well as anybody else. By what degrees she got him to speak he could never have told, but she did; and, before a quarter of an hour was over, he had confided to her all the speeches of old Betty, and all his horror in listening to them.

"You will think me almost as bad as Betty herself," Mrs. Lansdowne then said, very coolly, "if I tell you that this is

by no means the first I have heard of the matter."

"But it is too bad. It is most unjustifiable."

"Gossip always flourishes in a country parish," she went on; "and, after all, this is not such a very improbable piece of gossip."

"But I have never had the least intention of marrying," stammered the poor Vicar. "I think a clergyman is much better without a wife."

"Does not that depend a good deal upon circumstances? You will own that there are women who would be real helps to clergymen who have country people to deal with?"

"I am bound to own that such a woman as Miss Darcy is as valuable as she is rare. Her influence with the cottagers and with the children is amazing; and, if I have succeeded in making friends with them at all, it is by her help. I am not ungrateful, Mrs. Lansdowne; but still, what a price this is to pay!"

It was rather to Mrs. Lansdowne's credit that she kept her countenance in face of the Vicar's comic distress.

"You must remember," she said, "that the idea of marrying our dear Nora does not strike us as such a terrible one. I wished nothing better for my son."

Mr. Piers grew very red.

"I feel it as much, or almost as much, on Miss Darcy's account as on my own," he said; "and the question is how to stop it."

"I feel pretty sure," Mrs. Lansdowne answered, "that she has heard nothing of it yet. But (please forgive me for speaking like an old friend) don't you think the old women may be right—so far, at least, as that it is the very best thing you can do?"

"Oh dear, no," said the Vicar.

"Of course I have not the least idea what Nora would say," Mrs. Lansdowne went on, unheeding. "She is devoted to the place and the people, and that would be a bribe to her; and there is not a soul in the place who would not be delighted to think of keeping her here always. But still, if you

are determined against it, I will do what I can to stop people's tongues."

"I really never was so annoyed by anything," answered Mr. Piers, and soon after left the house.

As he walked home, he seemed to himself to have made matters worse. He began to see that, if he did not wish the gossip to continue, he must entirely reject Nora's help and counsel; and even supposing he had felt himself independent of them, he could not put a stop to them without being guilty of the most apparent ingratitude and discourtesy.

"Shall I get a curate?" was the desperate thought that suggested itself to him. But he could not persuade himself that there was work enough in the parish to employ two men; and, unless Miss Darcy would marry the curate, that plan would not help him much.

He reached home, and, for some reason, instead of going to his study, walked straight to the drawing-room. All the furniture there was new, and had a peculiarly

stiff and glazy look. The fire smouldered sulkily; the chairs seemed to defy anybody to sit down on them; the books were arranged on the tables with that dreary orderliness dear to housemaids. The whole place, once so cheerful, was enough to depress Mirth herself; and the Vicar, with horror, found himself thinking, "A wife would change all this."

He hurried to the study, and, after some other small affairs, decided to begin his next Sunday's sermon, that being a soothing occupation. But the only text he could think of was,—“He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife.”

“That will never do,” said the Vicar, shutting up his papers.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

Mrs. LANSDOWNE had told Mr. Piers the truth when she said that she had already heard some speech of his marriage. She might have added that she and her sister had contradicted the report with indignation, not thinking him at all good enough for their favourite. Second thoughts, however, had represented to them that there were certain decided advantages in the match ; in fact, if Nora could like Mr. Piers well enough to marry him, where would she have so much prospect of a happy life as in her old home ? It was these considerations which had made Mrs. Lansdowne speak as she had done ; and when the Vicar left her, she was not without hope that her words would bear fruit.

Meanwhile, the cloud, which Bertie's long absence had brought over Dean's Hall, did not lighten. There had been a hope of his bringing Phoebe down for Christmas, but it was disappointed. One day, about the middle of December, the two sisters drove to the cottage, and, sending their pony-carriage home, came in for a good chat.

It soon appeared that they had a special object, and one much at heart, which was to beg Mrs. Darcy and Nora to spend Christmas week with them.

"It is the first time since he was born," Mrs. Lansdowne said, "that Bertie has not been with me for Christmas. I don't know what it will seem like."

"I never saw my brother so out of spirits," added Miss Norton; "and Nora is the only person the least likely to cheer him up."

There was no resisting an invitation of this kind; and, accordingly, it was accepted. Mrs. Darcy and Nora were to remove to Dean's Hall on Christmas-eve, and to stay here over New Year's Day.

Nora was heartily glad that it should be settled so. She had been dreading the effect on her mother's nerves—and a little on herself, too—of this first Christmas, robbed of the old brightness. The last one had been so pre-eminently happy, so full of satisfaction in the present and hope for the future! And the change that had come between that time and this was so all-pervading, that she snatched at any means of putting aside and forgetting, if it might be, her own individual circumstances and feelings. She made the arrangements for shutting up the cottage, therefore, with great good will, and troubled herself little for the moment with what was going on outside.

Not a hint had reached her of the report which so disturbed the Vicar. He had missed coming to them, as he now usually did, one evening in the week; but she supposed that the season had brought him, as it had formerly brought her, a quantity of additional work, and she had not, just lately, visited any of the cottages where she would certainly have been informed.



On the day appointed, Mrs. Darcy was wrapped up carefully, and drawn, as of old, by Joe (now in Mr. Norton's service), and, escorted by Nora, made the short journey to Dean's Hall.

How pleasant the change was to these handsome and comfortable rooms! Nora could not help sighing as she looked round her mother's bedroom, curtained, and cosy, and all aglow with fire and candles, and thought of the cramped cottage chamber she had left. "And *they* are so immensely rich!" she said to herself, as she thought of her cousins. "Eleanor is but a little older than I am.: I wonder if she loved her mother as I do mine. At any rate, she could never have known what it was to see her suffering privations money would remove. Oh, I begin to hate poverty!"

She felt no hatred for anything, however, but a great deal of affectionate enjoyment when the business of getting settled was over, and the whole party were assembled round the parlour fire. A particularly comfortable chair had been found for Mrs.

Darcy, close to the wide hearth. The dainty old-fashioned tea-service was on one of the quaint tables beside Mrs. Lansdowne; and opposite to Mrs. Darcy sat Mr. Norton, delighted with his guests, and ready to pour out all the day's news for their entertainment.

"How nice it is to be here!" said Nora, involuntarily; and the host and hostesses thought they had never heard a more sensible speech. She was happy; not light-hearted as she had been a year before, but happy with a certain knowledge of good and evil, and that conscious and intentional holding fast of her happiness which has in it a silent confession of pain and loss. She had never seemed brighter or sweeter to the elder people round her. And the twin sisters, when they were alone, talked gravely over the question whether she were not, indeed, far too valuable a possession to be made over to one so unappreciative as Mr. Piers.

Christmas Day came, and the whole party, even Mrs. Darcy, went to church. More than one of them thought of last year, sadly

enough. Bertie had been with them then. Miss Norton's eyes were full of tears; and her ears were deaf to the sermon, as she remembered how she had smiled to herself then, to see Bertie watching Nora, as she sat, radiant in her pretty violet and white dress, in the Vicarage pew, now empty. Nora was close at hand, indeed, but black robed, and paler than she should have been. And where was Bertie? "Poor boy!" she said to herself, with a sigh which was almost an audible groan.

The Vicar's sermon, it must be owned, was very poor indeed. The state of his mind lately had almost taken away from him the power of work. Though Nora knew nothing of the cause, she felt the result, and could not keep her attention alive. She thought of her father, and then her thoughts also turned to the absent Bertie. There they stayed, for she was completely puzzled. Were things going badly with her old playfellow? If so, in what way? He had written to say that he would try to run down for New Year's Day, but alone. "Phoebe was afraid of the

cold journey." But Phœbe was by no means delicate, and had not been tenderly brought up; the cold must be a mere excuse. Would she not come to Woodside? or would he not bring her? There was no quarrel between her and her husband's family; for she had written to them, for Christmas, letters which were short, certainly, but otherwise faultless; and they had sent her, as Nora knew, valuable and carefully considered presents. Yet something seemed to be wrong, and thoughts of Bertie were not suited to brighten the Christmas service.

Nora knew nothing of the Vicar's state of mind; but, if she had done so, she must needs have pitied him. From the day of his conversation with Mrs. Lansdowne he had never had an hour of perfect comfort. Out of doors he felt as if everybody he met was going to say to him, "When is it to be?" In-doors he was haunted by two conflicting demons, one of whom whispered, "Think of your high ideal,—hold fast your plan of life"; and the other, "She would help your work, and brighten your home." For an

easy-going man, who liked quiet, and was unused to strong emotions, it was a wretched life, and he felt that it must be made an end of somehow.

The fact was, that unconsciously he was drifting round to the point of view Mrs. Lansdowne had suggested to him; and a second talk with her had given him a fresh push in that direction. She had said nothing new; but as he had come to her better prepared for her suggestions, they had had a greater and more immediate effect. At last he gave way entirely, and on Christmas-eve, in the morning, he walked up to Dean's Hall, to tell her his decision, and ask her advice.

When he stammeringly informed her of the victory won by the joint means of Betty Higgs and herself, she felt for the moment a strong misgiving. She had just discovered that Nora was anxious, very anxious, about the future for her mother's sake. Nora had not intended to betray herself in this matter, but she had done so; and Mrs. Lansdowne now suddenly reflected, that perhaps, even if the girl felt a total disinclination to marry the

Vicar, she might accept him for the sake of Mrs. Darcy. "It would be dreadful," Mrs. Lansdowne's conscience whispered her, "if I have helped to push on such a marriage as that."

But it was too late to draw back; and she had much confidence in Nora's integrity. Since the Vicar had decided to give her the choice, why she must have it.

"I think you are quite right," she said. "And if you do marry her, I am certain you will have no cause to repent it."

"I hope so," he said, doubtfully; "I hope so, I am sure. The sooner it is settled the better, certainly. She may say 'No,' after all."

It was difficult to know whether he hoped or feared she would say "No"; but, at any rate, there was no reason for putting off the trial.

"You are coming to dine with us to-night," said Mrs. Lansdowne; "will you speak to her then?"

"No, thank you," he said, nervously. "No—I—I really should not know what to

say. It would be much easier if you would be so good as to speak to her first."

"Don't trust too much to me," Mrs. Lansdowne answered, half laughing. "I will, if you like, go so far as to tell her you have something particular to say to her: you must do the rest yourself, really."

"But I should speak to Mrs. Darcy first, should not I?"

"Yes, I think so. But I know she will leave Nora free to do as she likes."

They settled finally that Christmas Day should be allowed to pass, and that next day Mr. Piers should call to see Mrs. Darcy, whom Mrs. Lansdowne would prepare to receive him. She also promised to give Nora a hint, so that, if her mother approved, she might be ready in turn to hear what he had to say.

It was on the evening of Christmas Day that these two commissions were fulfilled; and it would be hard to say whether mother or daughter were the most astonished at the revelation made to them. They were in Mrs. Darcy's room, which Nora was preparing to leave for the night. When

Mrs. Lansdowne was gone, Nora bent over her mother for her good-night kiss; but Mrs. Darcy caught her hand and held her fast.

"My child," she said, "tell me what I am to say to him."

Nora turned away her face to hide the trouble written on it.

"I cannot tell, mother. It is so sudden: I must have time to think."

"Rather *no* than *yes*, if there is a doubt, Nora."

"I will tell you in the morning. Good-night, dearest. *You* like him, mother?"

"Yes, my child; but I have never thought of him in this way. Good-night."

Nora came from her room next morning with a look that would have augured ill for the Vicar if his had been, in any sense, a love-suit. She had hardly slept; she was very pale and very silent. To the few questions Mrs. Darcy asked she returned no longer answers than were necessary, and they went down to breakfast with the important question neither asked nor answered at all.



Mr. Norton, as usual, left them as soon as breakfast was over. The ladies removed to their usual morning sitting-room, and directly afterwards Mrs. Lansdowne and Miss Norton started for a walk. Nora had seated herself by the window, a piece of work in her hand, at which she stitched feverishly. When their friends were gone, she suddenly got up, and standing behind her mother's chair said,—

“Do not send him away, mother. When you have told him that you approve, I will do the rest.”

She slipped from the room almost as she said the last word, and Mrs. Darcy had no time to think what to do. Before Nora had reached the door of her own room, she heard the Vicar's knock, and knew that he was there to decide her fate.

END OF VOL. I.





